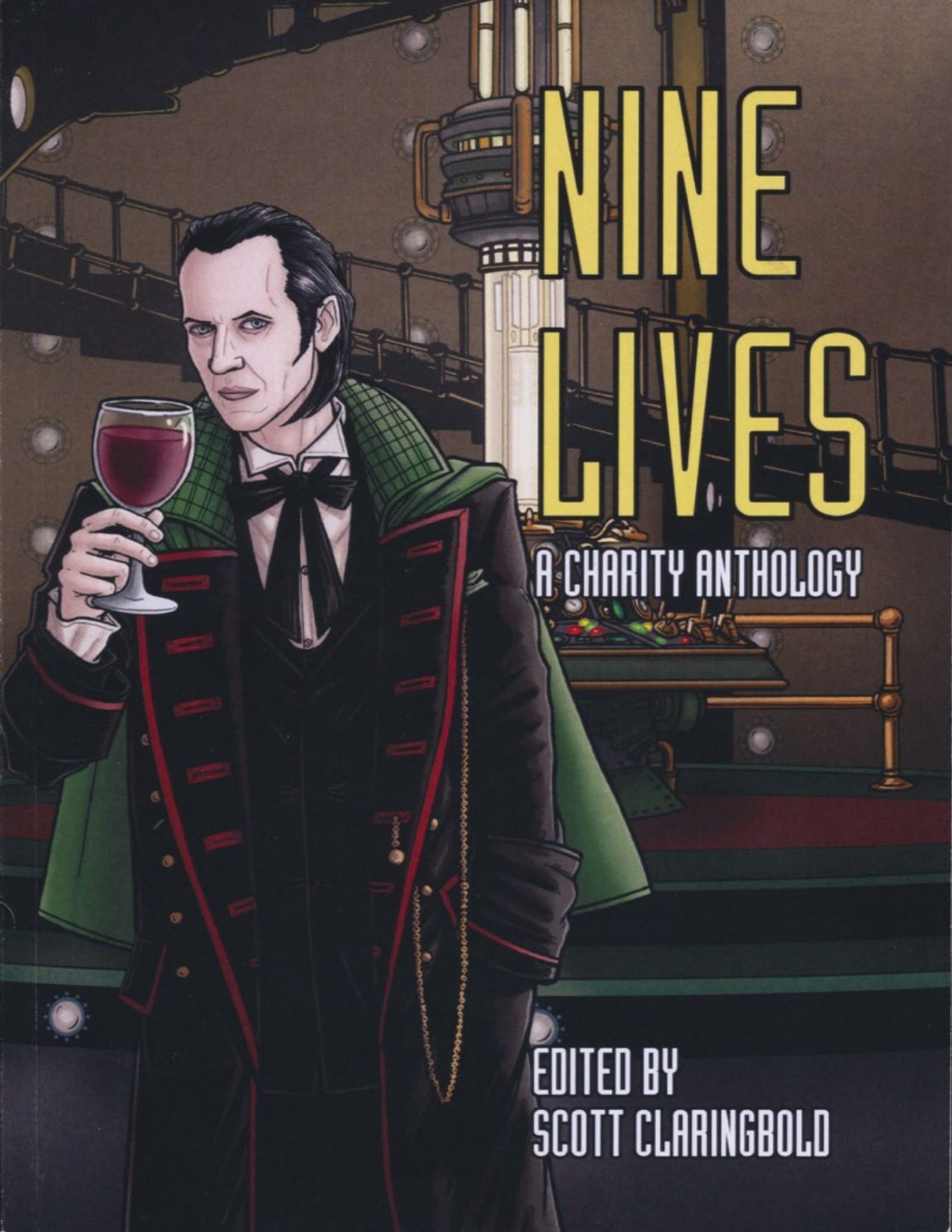
NINE
LIVES
A CHARITY ANTHOLOGY
EDITED BY
SCOTT CLARINGBOLD

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RED TED BOOKS

Full cover by Paul Hanley

Cover design and titles by Kevin Candela
and lain McLaughlin

Nine Lives
A Shalka Doctor Book.

This anthology is published by Red Ted Books and was
created by fans of Doctor Who in an effort to raise
money for the MS Society and the Stroke Association.
No effort has been made on our part to supersede the
copyright of any characters.

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This is a non-canon collection of 'could have been'
stories featuring the Doctor - voiced by Richard E.
Grant - in the webisodes collectively known as Scream of the Shalka.

First published 2017.

FOREWORD

Scream of the Shalka feels like it was (broadcast?) a very long time ago. I was a different person then, and so was the Doctor. I'm pleased how parts of it anticipate similar decisions made by Russell when be brought back live-action *Doctor Who*. Equally, some of the lines I wrote make me wince, and some directions were the opposite of what turned out to work.

What's been most pleasing about the whole thing turns out to be, however, nothing that was obvious at the time, but the afterlife it's had in spawning so much fan art. I love seeing the online reaction in

terms of pictures, fan fiction and the like.

There's always something about a road not taken that fans love, and we offer a whole motorway system of that. But still, this much? Aww! You guys!

This collection of such is for a noble cause, and I'm assured all the money's going there. I rather carefully haven't dipped into the material therein, because if I did, and was to see something I didn't like, or did like, and then comment on it... well, that's the start of a slippery slope toward a canon of *Shalka,* and, as with all *Doctor Who,* having a canon is something to be avoided at all costs. Not that I have the authority to impose one, but people might feel I had, and a feeling is all that's been required to sometimes create the illusion of canonicity about the rest of *Who*.

Nevertheless, a whole book of *Shalka*! Isn't that great? Go on, dive in!

Paul Cornell

Gloucestershire, February 2017.

PROLOGUE

STEVE CLARINGBOLD

I have lived many lives. All different but all intertwined. But this one, this one feels different. It's almost like it's not connected to my past or my future. Regeneration has always been a tricky thing. See, the trouble with regeneration is you never know what you are going to get. At the beginning of my fifth life the regeneration nearly failed causing me to become aspects of all four of my previous incarnations for a brief period.

Then, at the start of my sixth life, everything became dark. I nearly strangled my companion, Peri, as the regeneration had become so dangerously

unstable. This dark side was a foreshadowing of what I could become as I learned a long time ago that somewhere between my twelfth and thirteenth regenerations that I could actually become The Valeyard.

Ah, The Valeyard, the amalgamation of all the dark sides of my personalities, we'll come back to him.

So what am I now?

I am the Doctor who wasn't meant to be. Soon, I will unravel the mystery and come to know all about why I have come to be but first-let's go back to where it all began.

A WRONG TURN

"Charley, quick, this way." The Doctor was currently shouting at his most recent companion as they weaved in and out of passages with electrical outlets exploding around them. No sooner than 30 minutes before they were both in the belly of the spaceship

carrying a fleet of Daleks bound for Earth.

Charley turned to the Doctor and with some exasperation said, "Doctor, what have you done and why are we running?"

"Well, Charley," The Doctor replied. "It's like this, I basically inverted the conduit of the direct current which has now caused a main rupture in the hull of the ship and will eventually lead to the whole ship to fragment somewhat."

"And in plain English please?" Charley enquired.

"Well, basically, I cut a lot of wires and the ship is about to explode" replied the Doctor.

Charley asked, "Err, Doctor did you mean to do that?"

"Not exactly what I was planning Charley, no," said the Doctor. At that point the Doctor grabbed Charley's hand, and they twisted and turned through the ship as they tried to make their way back to the Tardis .

"This way Charley, the Tardis is just around this corner," said the Doctor as he dragged her along.

The Doctor took his key, opened the door to the Tardis and flung Charley through. As he made his

way inside, a Dalek appeared ahead.

For a second The Doctor froze giving the Dalek just enough time to fire off a shot which caught the Doctor flush in the chest. He fell backwards into the Tardis.

"DOCTOR" Charley screamed.

The cloister bells in The Tardis suddenly started ringing, deafening both The Doctor and Charley. Signalling impending danger.

"Help me up Charley, and I'll get us and the old girl out of here," said the Doctor. The Tardis being the 'old girl' he was referring to.

Charley helped him to his feet and and they staggered over to the main console. A few pushes of buttons, and pulls of levers later, and the Tardis disappeared from the Dalek ship, just as the enemy craft exploded into tiny atoms.

"I'm afraid this is it for this old body Charley," The Doctor whispered in a frail voice. "The shot to the chest will start a regeneration in me which will see a whole new Doctor come to be."

The Doctor and Charley had discussed regeneration before. He had never hidden the fact

from her that one day a new Doctor would replace him, but neither of them were expecting it to come so soon.

"Oh Doctor," said Charley, "I don't want you to go, not yet. I'm not ready."

"You'll have new adventures with the next incarnation of me, it's not the end Charley." The Doctor then turned to Charley with a glint in his eye and gave her a final farewell, "Goodbye Charley...and good luck."

At this point the regeneration sequence began.

NOT YOUR TIME

The Tardis landed on a barren-looking planet. The door to the craft was wrenched open and the regenerating Doctor spilled out, with Charley not far behind. The regeneration was in full flow at this point when a hooded figure loomed on the horizon.

The figure pointed at the Doctor and said, "This is not your time."

As quickly as the regeneration had started it suddenly stopped.

"Take him back inside and leave," The figure said to Charley.

"How can I leave? I don't know how to operate the Tardis."

"The Tardis will leave of its own accord once you are both back inside, it will know what to do," the figure replied.

Charley started to pull the Doctor back towards the Tardis when the figure said one more thing to her. "Charley, do tell the Doctor we will meet again...soon."

"How do you know my name?" Charley shouted. But the figure was already walking away.

As Charley dragged The Doctor safely inside the Tardis the door swung closed and it started to fade.

Just before it disappeared, however, a spark of regeneration energy ignited.

The sparks grew larger, like a New Years Eve fireworks display. Seconds later the light show had ended ,leaving the body of a naked man on the ground.

THIS HAS NEVER HAPPENED BEFORE

Back inside the Tardis, The Doctor started to come around after his apparent failed regeneration.

"Doctor, are you still with us?" Charley asked.

The Doctor sat up and touched his face before looking at his palms, and then the back of his hands.

"Oh, this isn't right, this isn't right at all," The Doctor proclaimed.

Charley didn't know what to say to The Doctor, she was confused by what had happened. He had told her about his past lives and that one day, when this life was over, he would move on to another incarnation, but the look on his face told her that something was seriously wrong.

The Doctor had, by now, worked his way over to the Tardis console and was looking at himself in a mirror. Constantly touching his face in disbelief.

Charley eventually plucked up the courage to ask, "What is happening, Doctor?"

"Charley, I really don't know what to tell you," The Doctor replied. "When the Dalek blast hit me in the chest it triggered the beginning of a regeneration which for some reason has failed."

Charley looked the Doctor square in the eyes and asked "But what does that mean?"

The Doctor looked back at the face of his worried companion before replying, "I don't know, this has never happened before."

He stared off into the distance, deep in thought. After what seemed like a lifetime he turned to Charley, "I am still the same Doctor that I was before, but something feels different. It's almost like a part of me is missing."

He slammed his hands on the Tardis console and then his hands began their frantic manipulations, as they danced deftly over the many buttons, dials, and levers.

Charley saw the determined look in his eye, "So, where to then, Doctor?"

"I'm attempting to work out the location we were just at," The Doctor said to Charley. "I want to return and get some answers."

Charley remembered what the figure had said to her on the planet. "Doctor, the hooded figure said that you would meet again soon."

The Doctor, intrigued, replied, "Maybe not soon enough though. The Tardis is resisting taking us back to our last destination. Something seems to be blocking its navigation controls."

WHO ARE YOU? WHERE AM I?

The robed figure looked down at the naked man curled up in the foetal position at her feet. She summoned more people from the shadows. She placed a cloak over the naked body and her companions picked him, carrying him to a nearby cave.

In the brightly lit cavern, the woman checked over the man. He was tall and gaunt, his long hair, which was receding at the top, had flashes of grey streaks on either side.

A companion arrived by her side and said, "Is

this the one?"

The robed woman replied, "It is, but I always imagined it was a myth, I never thought it would come to pass, go tell the others, for soon I will have to talk to him."

Two hours later, the tall man began to groan. He rolled over to one side, his eyes flickering open.

"Ah, you're awake," said the woman, her hood now down, showing her face and her long dark hair.

The man asked the woman, "Who are you, where am I?"

"Ah, Doctor. Can I call you Doctor? My name is Ohila," the woman replied.

"I recognise this place. Have I been here before?" the man now revealed to be The Doctor asked.

"You have been here many times before Doctor. Do you not recognise The Sisterhood of Karn?" Ohila asked.

The Doctor put his hands to his temples and rubbed his head. "I'm trying to remember, but I feel dizzy," The Doctor said to Ohila.

"Here, have something to drink," said Ohila, passing him a goblet. "You will likely be confused

for a little while, this wasn't a simple regeneration. We have much to discuss, but for now rest."

The Doctor wanted to ask more questions but Ohila was right. The regeneration had taken much out of him. He felt quite nauseous, and needed more time to recover.

He laid back against a rock and closed his eyes with a multitude of questions rolling around in his head.

WHAT MADNESS IS THIS?

The Doctor was underneath the Tardis controls waving his sonic screwdriver around while Charley stood at the controls awaiting his instruction.

"Ok Charley, if you can just pull that lever to your left, please..." Charley did as she was instructed and the Tardis whirred into action. The Doctor popped back up from beneath the controls and grabbed a computer screen. He tapped at a few buttons and the blurred image of a planet appeared

on the screen.

"Ah, this makes some sense. That is the planet Karn." The Doctor revealed to his companion.

"Are we going back?" Charley asked.

"Indeed we are Charley," The Doctor replied, "I need to find out what is going on."

Within moments the Tardis was beginning to materialise again on the planet of Karn. As The Doctor and Charley made their way to the door they heard a familiar sound of groaning engines, followed by a thud.

As The Doctor opened the door to the Tardis he found that his entryway was blocked by another Tardis. It was almost a replica of his own, but darker in shade.

"What madness is this?" The Doctor asked, turning to Charley.

A figure dressed in black and grey emerged from the newly materialised Tardis, and made his way towards where Ohila and the newly regenerated Doctor were.

NO, IT CAN'T BE HIM.

The Eighth Doctor and Charley were stuck inside the Tardis. The Doctor had tried to move his craft to another part of the planet, but the Tardis had refused to budge.

"Damn," The Doctor exclaimed.

The Eighth Doctor, frustrated, turned to the viewing screen in The Tardis and fiddled with some wires, so that he could see what was going on outside.

Eventually, he managed to turn it on. He saw the figure by the rocks, being tended to by a woman. In the background was a figure dressed in black and grey, walking towards them.

"I think that might be the woman who said that you would meet again soon." Charley said, having recognised the lady on the screen tending to the unconscious man. "But who are the other people?"

The Doctor replied, "Well, the female definitely seems to be part of the Sisterhood of Karn, the inhabitants of this planet."

"As for the male that she is with..." The Doctor stopped in the middle of his sentence and looked deep in thought. "He seems familiar, like I've seen him before. As for the other person, Charley, I can't see his face, but I have a strange and unnerving feeling that he is known to me too." The Doctor continued.

The Eighth Doctor saw the male by the rocks sit up. It was at this point that he tried to enhance the sound frequency, so he could pick up what was being said.

The sound was fuzzy at first, a bit like white noise, but after a few turns of the tuning dials, the sound became clearer and The Eighth Doctor could hear the conversation.

* * *

Ohila was by the newly regenerated Doctor's side when he awoke. "You're awake again Doctor, just take it very easy, and then we'll talk."

The Doctor turned to her, "Please, explain what has happened to me."

"It will be hard to explain Doctor, things have happened a little out of line," Ohila replied. "You see, you weren't meant to be here yet. You're at least a few regenerations out of sync."

"Out of sync, but how can that be?" The Doctor asked, his face crumpling in confusion.

"It appears that when the Eighth version of yourself was injured it started a regeneration phase." Ohila informed the Doctor.

"And so, I regenerated and became this new version of myself." The Doctor said.

Ohila looked at the Doctor, her craggy face showed sympathy for his confused state, "Well, it's not quite that simple."

* * *

Meanwhile, The Eighth Doctor was still stuck in The Tardis, witnessing, and now hearing, all of the events going on outside.

"This is all very confusing, Charley, it would appear our friend with the lady down there, is another incarnation of me."

"I don't quite understand Doctor. How can you have regenerated when you are still standing here?"

The Doctor put his arm on Charley's shoulder in an effort to reassure her, before saying, "Hmm, didn't our female friend say that there is more to it than meets the eye?"

"What does that mean, Doctor?"

"It looks like my failed regeneration may have started off a sequence of events that has led to the appearance of the other Doctor," The Eighth Doctor continued. "Things are certainly getting interesting. I just wish I could get out of this blasted Tardis and ask some questions, myself."

At that point the mysterious figure in black and grey turned. Charley was concerned, as she saw the look of horror on the Doctor's face. She turned to The Eighth Doctor and asked, "Doctor, what is wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

The Doctor looked straight into his companion's eyes and *proclaimed,* "I think *I have,* Charley. But it can't be. No, it can't be him."

"Who, Doctor, who is it?" Charley enquired.

"My ultimate foe, Charley, he's my ultimate foe."

The Eighth Doctor replied.

The Tardis chose that moment to come to life. The Doctor jumped to his feet, grabbing at the console. The time ship was taking them away from Karn. The Doctor hated to admit it, but the old girl was doing him a favour.

AN INTERESTING TURN OF EVENTS

The figure was still lurking in the background. The Doctor had spotted him, "Who is that?" He enquired with Ohila.

Ohila glanced over at the figure and replied to The Doctor, "Well, he's part of the reason you're here, I guess."

"Do tell me more," The Doctor said to Ohila, eager to get to the bottom of the events that were unfolding.

Ohila turned to the Doctor and said, "In every Time-Lord there is a good and a bad version. At every regeneration there is conflict between these

two sides, and ultimately the personality you are meant to be will come out. The Master himself was once a good person, but sadly, over the course of his regenerations, the bad side of his personality won out. At every regeneration you have, this battle is played out over, and over again. The regeneration started in the Eighth Doctor and a combination of events led to the splitting of these two personalities. The Eighth Doctor continues unabated where he will eventually take part in the Time War. He will have to live with some of the decisions he makes during this period but he will be redeemed. There is too much good in him not to be."

"But what does all this mean for me?" said the Doctor.

She turned to The Doctor and said, "Don't you understand? This version of you, the Doctor that split in two, it is this version that is destined to become The Valeyard."

At that point The Doctor looked at the figure in black and grey in the distance who returned his gaze, giving him a nod and a wry smile.

"Oh," said the Doctor with some surprise,

followed by a smirk, "Well, that will be interesting."

THE FREELANCE GARDENER

A DOCTOR WHO TRIBUTE

KEVIN CANDELA

I

You hear stories about brownies: little sprites who take care of your house and leave you baked treats if they like you and you respect them.

I was pretty sure the man riding my lawnmower wasn't a yard brownie.

I figured he was crazy.

He turned the corner and waved at me. Looked like he was following up on what I'd already done, driving nice straight lines. Except he didn't have the

blades engaged.

He pulled right up to me before I knew what was happening. He was grinning like a happy fool.

"I'm trying to do what you were doing," he told me over the roar of the engine, "but I don't seem to be making the grass look like you were."

"The cutting deck isn't engaged," I said, wondering why I was explaining it at all.

"Oh!" he said, and he started looking the thing over as if for the first time. "Little help, perhaps?"

I told him I had to show him how to do it. Clever, huh? He turned the key and killed the engine.

"I can't sit on your lap," I said. "Would you mind?"

"Ah! A demonstration. Excellent. My eternal gratitude, old chap."

I had already figured out he sounded British but that sealed my assessment. He sprung off the mower and did a little two-handed flourish gesture aimed at the mower seat.

I introduced myself, offering my hand. He looked at me a little odd and it took him a couple of

seconds to figure out he was supposed to squeeze and shake my hand in return. He seemed a bit too thrilled and amused when he got the hang of it.

"And you are?" I said.

He honestly looked puzzled. "I would very much like to answer that," he said, "but I may need a moment."

He didn't seem a likely candidate for dementia, but you can probably understand my concern.

"No, I'm fine," he said. "Believe me, you'd be just like this if you'd had a day like mine."

I figured he was a neighbor's guest, but no. "Where *did* you come from, then?" I said.

He pointed toward the woods. The woods with nothing behind them but a limestone bluff a half mile back. I mentioned that.

"That's odd," he said. "I guarantee you I came from there."

It was a sunny day, but not hot. If he'd been in the woods—and his slack cuffs full of cockleburs suggested strongly that indeed he had—he'd have had no chance whatsoever of sunstroke. Though seeing how pale he was, I thought it might be

possible.

I politely asked him why he felt like riding my lawnmower.

"New world."

Yes, that answer hit me as oddly as you might expect.

"You know," he finally said, fixing me with an attempt at a smile, "have to see if things in this one work like they do in the last. They don't always, you know."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Did you say new WORLD?"

That seemed to trigger something like paranoia. It came out of the blue. His glum weirdness was gone and his eyes were darting here and there as if he expected Men in Black to jump out from behind —well, anything they could conceivably be hiding behind.

"Mind if we talk inside?" he said.

Needless to say I wasn't too thrilled with the thought of letting this "I came from the woods to hijack your mower" freak into my place. But he really didn't seem too dangerous, and I knew that virtually every other household in the neighborhood

would already have called the cops on him; I mean, the ones that wouldn't just flat-out shoot him.

He had no idea how lucky he'd gotten.

II

As you can probably imagine I didn't turn my back on the guy for more than a second or two at a time. Once I had him sitting at the kitchen table I went over and made him some hot tea (since he said no to coffee.) I think he was a little bummed that I didn't have milk—I'd forgotten that was how the English tend to like it.

He was completely civilized. The paranoia was gone. So I figured I'd try to get a little better idea of how he ended up on my lawnmower.

"Now when you say you came out of the woods," I said, "I have to wonder how you got into them."

"As do I."

"You're not Bigfoot," I told him. "You're not a caveman. You're not a deer."

"A spot *of good* luck on that last one," he said. The grin was back. "Their self-defence tends to be limited to 'Run away!'"

"Yeah, welL.my point is that your clothes don't exactly say 'nature boy.' So my spider senses tell me you had to have been somewhere before that; you know, where you got those clothes."

"I—you have spider senses? Marvellous! I've not yet been to a world like that."

I explained the reference.

"I see," he said. "Interesting. Last world I was on didn't have Spider-Man as I recall. I think they had a character called Slugger about a half-human/half-slug, but that was a pretty civilized place: They were just at the point of realizing they had to eradicate surface judgement. Still, repugnant thing..."

He shuddered.

I let him go on as I finished my stale breakfast coffee.

"So, America then?"

"Pretty much," I said. "Where were you this time yesterday?"

He laughed. Loud.

"Pangea."

Yes, I'd heard of it. I told him so. "The original continent," I said. "Seems to me having all the land in one place would make it a bit lopsided, but what do I know?"

"How do you know it didn't?"

"Pangea."

"Pangea."

Naturally I mentioned the whole "that was a hundred million years ago" aspect of his claim.

"I'm afraid the truth is something you may not like. You will likely find it a bit messy and absolutely impossible to believe."

I told him I'd listen to anything. After all, I was trying to size the guy up and decide whether a private call to 9-1-1 from the john was in order.

"All right," I said, "try me."

"Try you what?"

"Tell me the truth. Tell me your story."

"Oh, I barely remember any of that..."

Sigh. "Okay then," I said, "how about telling me what I would find impossible to believe."

"Oh, right! That would be the whole multiple

universes thing. Do your scientists talk about that?"

"They're not my scientists, but yeah—I think so."

"Well, it's about time they got around to that. Hah! Time. Get it? No, you wouldn't, it's an in joke I suppose."

"Multiple universes, huh?"

"Exactly, old toot. Or multiple existences, multiple frequencies of existential wave harmonics—whatever you like. Bottom line is there are other places called Earth—this IS Earth, right? I mean it smells like it—but this IS the center of one of the most arrogant species in this one, right?"

"No, it's Neptune."

"*Really*?"

He took that literally, it seemed. He looked around, squinting this way and that.

Finally he turned back to me. "No! It's not. Is it?"

"That's what all the signs on Venus and Mars say,' I told him

"That it's Earth, I mean."

"You're an odd fellow."

Right back atcha, monfrer.

"I've been told that," I said. "So there are multiple

Earths?" "Oh yes, but not one per universe or anything. Still, there's usually one wherever I end up."

"So what, you're Doctor Who?"

"I have no idea whatsoever as to whom that is: quixotic moniker though. I rather like it."

He didn't know Doctor Who? Well, not impossible, but... "Okay, so you're from a planet that doesn't know who Doctor Who is. A different Earth. And you ended up here in the woods somehow?"

"A-HA! Now we're getting somewhere...I think. Yes. That's it. I 'ended up' in the woods here somehow. So if we can just suss out that part I think we'll have a much better picture of *our* mystery." *Okay Doc, I'll play along. Why not?*

"All right then," I said, "why don't you see if you can recall your most recent waking memory."

"Ingenious! You should be in charge."

I really hoped I was.

His eyebrows crawled together and he sat there staring at my refrigerator door and sucking on the side of his index finger.

"I have memories," he said when I was just about

to nudge him to see if he was still conscious. I backed off and sat down again. "They're foggy. Shiny men. Ugly little squid goo that's really nasty and smart."

"That's Doctor Who."

He broke out of his near trance and locked his eyes on me. They were suddenly really piercing.

"Can you show me your beloved Doctor?"

I was a fan of the series but just a casual one. Nothing on DVD. Nothing on DVR either because the show was between seasons. Took me a few minutes to remember you can find anything online.

I pulled up an episode from YouTube—a more recent one featuring Doctor Number Thirteen, Tom "Loki" Hiddleston.

"You think I'm him?"

"Do YOU?"

"I...I don't suppose I know. Does he exist? Are these reproductions of his exploits?"

I stifled a laugh.

"It's fiction. Are you familiar with stories made up for entertainment?"

"Of course! Do you think I was born on some

backwoods swamp world?"

"Where WERE you born?"

"GallL.wait. What? I was born in Leeds."

"'Galli' is a long way from Leeds word-wise. Why'd you say 'Galli'?"

He ended up shrugging. "Sorry. No clue."

"In this fictional series," I told him, "the Doctor's planet of origin is Gallifrey."

Well, that did it.

III

"Gallifrey! Bloody hell! How do you know that word?"

"How do *you* know it?"

Yeah. Take that, you weird lawnmower hijacker you. He had to think about it and finally admitted he didn't know.

"Okay," I said, "how about this: Have you ever been around anything that could mess with your memory?"

"What? Of course I have. All the time. But I know what I'm doing."

"How's that?"

"Because I'm the...because...my head hurts."

He put his face in his cupped palms.

"You have memory issues. And very nice, if odd, clothes. I doubt the local institutions allow such a wardrobe. So let's say you *are* a real life Doctor Who and you're here because of something that maybe also took your memory. Can something you—Doctor Who—have encountered have messed with your memories and also sent you here?"

Okay, for a moment that second time around I thought I *did* send him into an upright, eyes-open coma. He was pondering it, considering it so hard that I think he was shaking just a little. I got him some more tea and let him think.

And yeah, I kept my eyes on him the whole time.

Because there IS no actual flesh and blood Doctor Who.

I handed him the cup but he was just staring.

"Anything yet?" I said. He didn't respond so I nudged him. "Hey."

Damn. From the looks of it he'd gone catatonic. Just staring. That's all he was doing.

I pushed his shoulder a little harder.

"Yo, Doctor Who," I said. "You all right?"

Nothing.

I shook his shoulder. Hard. Harder...

I was just about to give up and call for official help when I noticed the strange gloom. I'm used to quick weather changes here, but I'd taken my weird guest inside under clear skies not twenty minutes earlier and there was in my mind no good reason for the darkening I was seeing beyond my kitchen window. I headed for the back door to get a look up at the sky.

My guest must have shaken out of his trance or whatever the instant I turned my back on him, because he caught me from behind when I was still about three steps from the door.

I spun around and twisted out of his grasp.

"What are you doing?" he said, his eyes wide. "Do you want to die?!"

"By looking out my back door?"

"You'd be surprised. VERY surprised."

I turned toward the door but he grabbed me again. I let him know I didn't like the hands on stuff.

I guess he resented that."Fine," he said. "Let them see you. I work better alone anyway."

"What's going on?" I said, glancing back and forth between the twilight past the door glass and my freaked out guest. "Who are 'them'?"

"You'd say it 'they' and sssshhhh! I'll tell you in the bathroom."

Before I knew it he had hold of my arm and was pulling me away from the window.

"Why the bathroom?"

"Does it have windows?"

"No, it's in the middle of the house. But..."

"Perfect. Come on. We're not safe near any window. If they can see us, they can get us."

So that's how I ended up in my tiny five by five bathroom with a panicking nut.

The funny part was that the weird was just getting warmed up.

IV

My guest wasn't content with the closed door. The ventilator fan bugged him.

"I don't know that they could fit down the duct," he said. "But they might be able to hear us."

"I don't know what to tell you," I said with a shrug.

"No problems, friend," he said, glancing around. "I'll get creative."

He seemed to think he carried a screwdriver but that it had gone missing. The Hiddleston episode hadn't featured the famous Sonic Screwdriver, which made that part particularly eerie.

But I didn't mention it.

"You can sometimes make do in a pinch with the edge of a dime," I said. "Depends on the screw slot."

"Great! Do you have one?"

I was in my pocket-less volleyball shorts, which I always used for lawn work. But I told him that my change jar was close by and he let me go after it once I vowed I wouldn't be exposed to any Windows getting there and back. I came back with something

better: an actual old school screwdriver. I handed it up to him and he quickly took off the cover while I was closing the door and looking at the plug he'd made with wash cloths wrapped around the Styrofoam block inside my shaving kit box.

He jammed that up in there and screwed the cover back on.

"Best we can do," he said.

"Wonderful. Now tell me what's..."

A siren. Faint but growing louder.

I looked at "The Doctor" (that's all I really had to call him, so I'm sticking with it.)

"Is that for us?"

"I would imagine so," he said without hesitation. "There will likely be more. Interdimensional intrusions tend to draw a lot of attention."

"What's intruding?"

"The bad guys."

That's about when I started wondering if the darkness outside and the siren might in fact be just a storm, one that snuck in fast, and a response to a damaging lightning strike, respectively.

"Why exactly are they bad?" I said.

"Well, they're bad if you're me, I suppose. Yes, said it wrong."

"So they're not dangerous to me," I said, "whatever they are?"

"Oh—oh yes, they'll kill you on sight."

"Are you telling me there's some kind of invasion and/or massacre going on out there right now?"

"Dunno...maybe. Probably not a massacre, though...that's not how they work."

"Do 'they' have a name so that we can stop calling them 'they'?"

He looked like he had to think about it.

But in the end he shook his head.

"Not really, I suppose," he said. "Then again they don't NEED one, do they? Best I can make of it they're out there in the ether all on their own, a lonesome hive, I guess you'd say. If you lived with a bunch of yous, and nobody else, would you need names? It'd be trite, wouldn't it: Sure it would."

If he resembled any of the Doctors from the series it would have to have been Tom Baker, but he was acting a lot more like Matt Smith: nervous, jumpy, disjointed—as though grasshoppers were

desperately trying to fill in for the ants that usually ran around his head with info keeping his mind orderly.

Or he was just plain nuts and had lied about everything including unfamiliarity with the series.

I confess I was leaning heavily on the latter when I heard it.

The back door unlatched. I heard its hinge squeak when I was just about to dismiss the click as my imagination. Knowing full well I'd closed it right, and don't ask me why I was so certain of that, I felt a strong urge to rush out there and see who was intruding.

"No! Stay here."

It was like he was reading my mind.

"But they're..."

He cut me off with a sharp head shake and a finger pressed against his lips.

Next idle thought to take center stage in my head's ongoing variety show was that this could actually be a team crime. His buddy might be out there robbing me blind. Although to be fair, if that was what was happening his partner was being

amazingly quiet about it.

The siren hadn't stopped. In fact there were two now, one whooping type and one up-and-down-the-scale wail. Those sirens were really the only thing keeping me in that room with him, the glue holding his absurd half-told tale of weirdness together.

He cut me off when I tried to ask him what he thought was going on out there, both inside my house and beyond. That's when he noticed the bathroom mirror for the first time.

He looked really happy to see it.

Then he tried to pry it off the medicine cabinet.

He stared at the door's hinges. I guess he realized they weren't the removable pin type and he couldn't take the mirror-fronted door off, because once that sank in he started checking out the whole cabinet...and emptying it haphazardly, setting everything down quietly but putting a lot of it right into the sink basin itself, i grabbed the plug pull handle and closed the plug so nothing went down the drain.

He looked my way, and it wasn't hard to tell that he hoped I knew how to take the whole thing off the

wall. I could only shrug, the cabinet having been there when I moved in.

He started prying on it with both hands, doing his best to pull the empty cabinet off the wall.

I guess I was in some sort of daze by then. I blame the sirens. There were three by then because a warbling tweet had joined the wail and whoop.

He wasn't strong enough. So he looked my way for help.

To be fair there were an awful lot of sirens out there beyond my walls.

So I helped him.

V

Yes, I know that sounds irrational but there I was, helping an apparently semi-amnesiac stranger I'd met riding my own lawnmower tear my own medicine cabinet off my bathroom wall a mere forty minutes or so later.

When it came free at last neither of us were ready

for it. I was off to the side when the screw heads pulled through the back of the cabinet, so my guest ended up pulling it free in a sudden heave-ho jerk that sent him slamming back-first into the bathroom door.

So much for keeping quiet.

I couldn't help it. "Think your *'they'* heard..."

He hushed me with a glare and a feverish head shake, pulling away from the door and turning slowly on it.

There he stood, my medicine cabinet clutched to his chest, intently focusing on the doorknob.

I was on the verge of laughing when the knob turned.The bathroom was the right place to be at that moment, although I wasn't sure I was going to be able to use it in normal fashion...not with that knob holding in the open position. The door didn't have a lock—the toilet was close enough you could hold the door shut with a couple of toes pressed against its base—so there was nothing to keep it closed against whatever had turned that knob.

I wanted to move but I couldn't, at least not before "The Doctor" did. He went one-handed on the

cabinet so as to shove me back with his right hand, which he did so far that I had to step back into the shower. Before I knew what was happening he'd thrown the curtain across the shower, hiding me behind it. He sure had a weird grin on his face as he was pulling it shut.

I heard him shuffle a little bit as I fought myself to try to get a peek around the edge of the curtain. I heard the door open.

I heard a body slump to the floor.

And then I heard it being dragged out of the room.

I was petrified. All I could think of was what horrific thing might be preparing to throw back the shower curtain and drop *my* motionless body into the tub.

But nothing happened. I listened, painfully holding stale air, eyes fixed on that curtain and the opaque beyond as the continuous dragging sound grew fainter and was quickly lost behind that muffled siren wailing.

Quiet. Not outside, but inside.

I still couldn't move, and I stayed that way

(although I eventually exhaled that depleted air) until I heard the voice.

"It must be annihilated."

Then, in response:

"It cannot be annihilated."

It was arguing with itself, apparently.

"Argue your cases."

That was the same voice too: kind of robotic, but not harsh. Calm. Gentle. Gender-free.

"Opening with the argument for annihilation," it said. "This entity is an uncontrolled element that has trespassed through our space not once but numerous times. In doing so no pattern has been detected and no attempt to contact has been noted. This entity regards the collective and the many frequencies of existence as entertainment. It displays little concern for balance, striving to intervene with demonstrated bias on occasions too numerous to recite. To allow this entity to continue is to invite others to duplicate its behavior, resulting in frequency overlaps, incursions and, in short, far too many serious risks to the matrix."

"Countering with the argument against

annihilation," it went on. "This entity has consistently demonstrated respect for the continuity of all frequencies between which it has traveled, and by doing so has at times contributed to the well-being of the matrix. The greater plan cannot be perceived, and so as we find our existence to be dependent on the harmonious continuity of the frequency matrix we cannot in good conscience risk depriving the matrix of a particularly unique component simply because we do not understand its function."

"Arguments both have validity," it said as if there were three of it and that one was the judge. "Argument for annihilation fails to account for uncertainties and unpredictable future events in which the entity may be a required presence. Argument against annihilation fails to account for possibility that entity's influence in future events of significance may in fact differ from established norms due to same unpredictability. Entity could just as easily destroy the matrix as preserve it."

There was a bit of a pause, as though the thing were waiting for its words to sink into its own...well,

let's take a wild guess and say "head."

"Decision impractical at this time," it finally said. "Entity will be detained until an adequately detailed assessment of its paradigm can be made. Prepare for transport."

Well, that sounded bad for the guy. I still wasn't buying that he was a real honest-to-Gallifrey Doctor—or THE Doctor, or whatever—but some weirdness was definitely going down.

By that time, well, I won't say I had my nerve back. But it had been a few minutes, the bathroom was quiet and I was really getting anxious to see what was going on. I took off my shoes, lugged my lead-heavy legs over the edge of the tub and went over and risked a peek out into the hall through the open door.

From the look of the shadowy hallway, there may as well have been a black squall thunderstorm hovering over the house. Nothing was looking back at me, fortunately, from either direction. I could hear noises again—dragging sounds coming from the kitchen—and I realized that at some point the sirens had stopped.

No, I didn't hustle down there to get a look. It probably took me three tiptoeing minutes to get fifteen feet. When I finally did get up the nerve to peek into the kitchen I saw ...

Nothing.

It, or they, or whatever, had even closed the back door. Quite gently, I guess.

VI

Had my half-jelly legs not managed to get me over to the back door window in decent time, I'd never have known. Never have *seen*.

But I did make it over there in time, and even though I saw nothing at first it wasn't long before I caught that crucial glimpse. I suppose it was inevitable that I turn my attention to that sky, seeing as how I couldn't figure out the darkness.

A huge hole in the sky.

For all the world or worlds that's what it looked like, although I could only see part of it: Maybe a

half mile away and (guessing, not good at heights) roughly equivalent altitude, cloudless sky met starry sky along a flawlessly curving edge.

A hole into space itself.

The sirens made plenty of sense at that moment, though why they'd gone silent wasn't apparent. As I said I could only see part of it, but that was enough to take a guess about what the rest looked like. I looked from side to side to take in the rest of the "space circle," and nearly relieved myself when I realized that my house had to be more or less dead center under it.

I should have stayed inside. But my curiosity had grown into beastly master that forced my legs to cease their shivering **and** before I realized what was happening, had me turning the knob and stepping outside.

Like I said, I should have stayed inside.

I was only down there for a few moments, standing in my backyard staring up at the impossible star-filled black disc in the sky. The silence hit me: There wasn't even so much as a bird chirping anywhere nearby, not that I'd be filled with

song either if i were them looking up at what I was seeing. But this was dead stillness. I could hear my own breathing. I think a neighbor two doors down could have, in fact, but I was the only idiot out there.

And so...

VII

Change of venue. I don't know how it happened—teleportation, hypnosis, both, neither—but the neighborhood flicked off and I was...well, somewhere else.

Right away I heard that calm, sexless robot.

"We regret this necessity," it said. "Our failure to secure your domicile against your egress resulted in a witness situation, which necessitates this hearing."

"Where am I?" It was pitch black, which was not helping. There was nothing under my feet, which was worse than not helping. My flailing arms found nothing around me. "What is this?"

"The realm between realms. The frequency that

surrounds the rest."

"It's dark."

"Very well. We shall address your sensory deprivation issue." Another change of venue. Wasn't dark anymore.

I was in a meadow, ringed in by rabbits. Big ones.

"This is what you are?" I said, looking them over.

"We are nothing you want to see, so think of us as these...bunnies."

I tried not to take that as an insult. "Fine," I said. "Bunny trial.""This is merely a hearing. You have committed no deliberate transgressions."

"Rabbit small claims court." I was joking to make sure I still had the sanity with which to joke.

"You are a unique entity," one bunny said. They all looked alike and sounded alike so there's no point saying which one. The one off a little to my left, I guess. "Though it appears that is mere coincidence, as analysis of your composition suggests no correlation to our prisoner."

"Okay, that's ...uh ...good?"

"Good is a subjective term from your reality."

"So what you're doing here is not intended for your own good?"

HA! Had 'em there. How I could even think to be that bold I have no idea.

Weird day.

"It has no intent. It is of necessity. We do what must be done to maintain the continuity of what you call existence."

"Why?"

I guess they'd never heard that one before. No immediate answer. I'd stumped the bunnies.

I was giddy with power. They apparently kept the matrix of realities apart, separate, maintained them in some kind of ether universe of their own. My freelance gardener seemed to have jaywalked through their turf on numerous occasions, which was why they'd taken him captive.

And here I was, the random element in the mix, winging it and getting in their faces just like the cinematic Dr. Who would do.

I figured I was about to die.

But not yet.

"Your question cannot be answered," a bunny

finally said. Others had their whiskers twitching like they were stirring two bowls of waffle batter apiece, one with each set. "The reason for our nature is beyond our intellectual capacity."

"Well, we humans have a thing," I said. "Unless we like the why, we usually don't feel too enthusiastic about what led up to thequestion. We rebel. We question. And as smart as you guys obviously are, I'm surprised you *don't."*

Oh geez, were my toes ever tingling. I was in a dance contest with Baryshnikov. Trying to hold up my end of a duet with John Hiatt. Sparring with ninjas. It couldn't possibly last.

But always go out with a flourish, I say.

"That guy you took from my house," I told them. "Why doesn't he remember much?"

"We did that," a rabbit said, "to confuse and slow him down so that we could capture him. He has not been harmed, and his memories have been fully restored."

"You can remove memories?" I said. "Well, if that's the case I'm surprised you didn't just get rid of my recent ones and leave me in peace."

"You committed no transgression, so we were unable to act upon you."

"You brought me here."

"You would have preferred we simply left you in your bewildered state, with no chance of ever understanding what transpired?"

I gotta say, at that moment I was on the fence about that. But as the question slowly sank in I realized that this was probably better: that is, assuming I survived and didn't end up a permanent resident of Bunnyland.

I told them as much. They said I could request that my memories of the past couple of hours be altered, not erased but 'smudged' such that I ended up like my neighbors, recalling only the hole in the sky and little else. The bunnies explained that they'd cordoned off the area around my locale with an energy field that prevented anything, even sound, from entering the zone of their influence. They'd lift it when current matters had been resolved and asked me what I thought my culture would think of the whole thing.

I cynically told them that there was a world

conspiracy in place to maintain a feeling of reliable normalcy and faith in the validity of science. I said they'd probably confiscate anything anyone recorded that could raise questions and then instruct the news/information media they control to refer to the event as a freak weather anomaly.

"BRA-VO!"

My unrequested yard laborer was standing beside me, grinning and clapping.

"Well done my boy," he said, and he reached out and patted my shoulder. "I can honestly say you reminded me of a young me. Say as a lad a mere few centuries old."

"What's going on?" I said. "Are you okay?"

"Yes! Smashing. I hope. I mean, I may be depending upon the mood of our gracious hosts."

He bowed to the bunnies, complete with arm flourish.

"We have decided your disposition," a bunny said.

"Who, me?" I said.

"You mean mine?" my new buddy said at exactly the same time.

I turned to him. "You are REALLY The Doctor'?"

That seemed more important somehow than finding out what was going to happen to me.

Surreal day.

He beamed. "Absolutely, my friend! Surely by now someone on your world, at some time or another, has suggested that anything that can be conceived by a mind must by definition actually exist somewhere else?"

I'd heard that, actually. "So somewhere there's a house made entirely of gingerbread?"

"House? There's a whole CITY made of food. Awful sanitation problems they have, though. I told them they really should have thought the whole thing through better."

"How...how can there be a TV show...?"

"The imagination of one man or woman." The Doctor seemed very much in his element now, fully aware, in control and just as charismatic as the actors who'd played him on "my" Earth. "Somewhere in another universe, or perhaps even in the one you're from, YOU are alive in someone else's mind as well: someone who's never met you, or

perhaps even seen your kind- someone, in fact, who might just be picturing you as a horrifying monster to be described and battled in a science fiction tale."

"Cool," I said, "I may be somebody else's Godzilla."

Doesn't everyone want to be Godzilla?

That's how I became the Doctor's Companion. He didn't seem to mind that I was male even though the fictional "him" I knew from TV decidedly seemed to prefer female passengers. I couldn't blame him for that, and can't say I'd have been any different.

I had no pets. Both my cat and dog were both gone and I was too busy working a couple of jobs to have a girlfriend. I suppose I'm a missing person by now and the house belongs to some financial institution but at least they let me get some of my stuff out of it.

By 'they' I mean the rabbits, of course. They let me have my guitar, which I can't play on the TARDIS (hell yeah there's a TARDIS and it's...well...you know ...) because it reacts to music sometimes and does weird stuff.

Oh yeah, and the rabbits confined us to one

universe and put "guards" (?) on it, though between you and me the Doc says he'll "see about that." It's interesting. Earth is much better. That's where we are. London. Duh.

This Earth didn't mess with fission. Or fossil fuels. Both ideas were discarded within a decade of discovery. Solar collectors span patches of desert and power subterranean mass transit systems, so the land is pristine and, of course, so is the air and water.

It's so nice here that I often feel sad for my original Earth. But there are countless Earths so there's no point moping about it. There are still problems here, of course, but at least the populace gets to focus on the unavoidable issues of life without having to devote all its energies to cleaning up its mistakes.

I haven't really adventured much with the Doctor yet. We're just getting started.

And yeah, I know how it ends with Companions. But if I luck out and live, I just might get to enjoy myself amongst a populace whose reach did not exceed their grasp.

And you can't put a price on that.

A STORM APPROACHES

NATHAN MULLINS

There were thunderstorms over the city of London on a cold wet night in December. A cat purred beside a police box in Trafalgar Square. Suddenly it stopped and looked over at a mouse, as it ran past down an alley. Intrigued, the feral cat left in search of food, and the police box slowly vanished.

Rudi sat in a pub close to the Cutty Sark and drank from a pint of bitter. He was waiting for his friend Arthur to arrive, and was already running late. "Come on, mate," he said, wishing he'd get a move on. "Where are you, man?" he wondered. The pub was slowly filling up as offices in the city

emptied late on a Friday night. "Don't want to miss the start of the match," he said, as the landlord switched the TV on and pub goers sat down to watch.

The rain that had pelted the wood of the alien machine faded as the time machine dematerialised. The man operating the machine was a tall dark figure in a long coat, hunched over the controls.

"The weather as it was many moons ago is as it is now," he mused, "Always unpredictable, a little like me," he smiled. "Still, makes a change," he said, patting the console unit. "Never did like summer. Especially going out in my usual attire. It just makes me hot!"

Rudi got a text from his friend. "Be there in a mo," it read. He rolled his eyes. He took a sip from his drink when the bell above the door tolled. He looked around and saw his friend roll up at the bar. "Sorry," he said. "Boss kept me behind. Something about my time keeping, as I'm sure you can imagine." Rudi chuckled to himself. "What are you having?" Arthur peered over the bar. "I'll have some of that," he said, pointing to something in the fridge.

"I haven't missed anything, have I?" he asked, looking over at the TV. "Not started yet," said Rudi, paying for his friend's drink. "Soon will be, though."

The Doctor put down in another part of the city. He emerged from the TARDIS with an umbrella at his side, and took long strides into a shallow mist that seemed to have enveloped parts of London. "Dear, dear," he muttered, flapping a hand about, trying to clear the smog, but it was no use. The weather here was as bad as it had been in Trafalgar Square. Lightning made him jump as it struck a branch across the street. Background noise filled his ears, the sound of voices in the distance, ordinary people leading ordinary lives, going about their business. He checked his watch. It was late.

It was nigh on kick-off and Rudi and Arthur found a space among the supporters, huddled watching in the corner. They were chanting and building to the suspense of the game when Arthur found it a struggle to breath. The pub was filled with smoke from multiple cigarettes and he told Rudi he needed some 'cleaner air'. "Alright," he said. "Hurry though, the game will be starting soon!" Arthur got

up and left, standing outside, trying desperately hard to catch his breath. He reached into his pocket and pulled out an inhaler. After two puffs, his frantic breathing slowed. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and began to feel calmer. After a moment, he was okay, looking back through the fogged up windows, just making out his friend cheering as the ref blew his whistle. Kick off. The game was afoot. It was then that he heard the sound of engines nearby grinding to a halt, as if something had put the brakes on suddenly, and he crossed the road to investigate. Rudi had been able to spot his friend through the side window, but when he looked a second time, he'd gone. Concerned, he got up to take a look. There was no sign of him, anywhere. He hurried over to the door and peered out. "Arthur?" he called. Nothing. He grabbed his coat from the stall he'd been sitting on, rushing out in search of his friend. He could see nothing in the darkness. Nothing except fog. He felt a chill down his spine as something slithered close by. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end as if he were in the midst of something terrifying.

"Arthur!" yelled Rudi, running now, reaching out with both hands, often coming into contact with a lamp post or street sign, unable to see a blasted thing. Arthur had heard voices calling his name. He too was in a place he couldn't make out. Around him, he could hear what he imagined everybody else could hear, the hustle and bustle of civilisation, but he could see no-one. He thought he must be in an alley some-place, lost, and beginning to feel cut off. Then the mist began to clear. He stood rigid to the spot. Buildings came into focus around him, and something else up ahead. Something less than human, standing on hind legs, gazing forward as if ready to lunge at its prey. Arthur realised if he were to run, he'd provoke it, and leading it onto the busy high-street, he'd endanger others. He gulped as it charged. This was it. He was a dead man. It was over in seconds. The creature that had done this raised its arms and the fog returned, shrouding the entire area in a cosmic veil, hiding the evidence, and retreating into darkness.

A howl of thunder made the Time Lord shudder. "Something's very wrong here," he said, leaning

forward on the umbrella, as if he were about to give a showman's performance of singing in the rain. As the mist became thicker, it was difficult to tell precisely where he was and if anyone was about. Then he heard a voice. "That you, Arthur?" The Doctor looked around. "I'm afraid not," he bellowed. "May I ask who's there?" He moved forward but stumbled on something in the darkness. He heard footsteps approach from up ahead. "My name's Rudi," said a man in a flap cap. He loomed over the Doctor out of the mist like a spectre. "What have you found?"

The Doctor had discovered a mobile and hacked in with his sonic screwdriver. "Arthur, I think," he said, not hiding his suspicions. "This is him, right?" he asked, as a picture of him appeared on the small screen, mist still covering the body at his feet. Rudi nodded, taking the phone and then peering closer at the corpse. He couldn't believe it. It was indeed his friend, Arthur. He got down on his hands and knees and stared opposite the Doctor. "He and I were at the pub tonight," he sniffed, trying to disguise the pain he felt, whilst knelt over the body. "He went

out to get some air and..." he stopped, trying to comprehend what had happened. He broke down in tears. Wiping his eyes, he put on a brave face and tried to make sense of things. "How did this happen?" The Doctor examined Arthur's remains. He shone his screwdriver from head to toe, discovering to his horror that he'd been strangled. "Murder," said the Doctor. "Tell me, how long between him leaving the pub to you finding him in this state?" Rudi looked at his watch. "No more than five minutes," he said, coughing as the mist began to choke him. "Why?" "Because when you found him, I was already here, which means whatever did this is capable of murdering somebody quickly, and it's out there," he said, pointing to the encroaching mist that seemed to be worsening as time went by.

"We have to find it... before it kills again."

Rudi stood up and took his cap from his head, throwing it at the Doctor's feet. "I don't see what this has to do with me," he shouted, angrily. "Arthur's dead, and if we go looking for the monster that did this, we might end up the same way!" The Doctor didn't like what he was hearing. "Arthur is dead," he

agreed. "You abandoned him to his fate. The least you could do is throw caution to the wind and help me find the killer at large!" Still coughing and beginning to feel sick, Rudi reluctantly agreed. "Alright," he said, finally.

"Right," grinned the Doctor. "First things first, call the police, tell them to get down here, and precisely what's happened. There's a phone box over there! Go, GO!" He gestured in the direction of his TARDIS. Rudi gave him a thumbs up and rushed over to the blue box. He picked up the phone but it was engaged. He knocked on the door, but there was no answer. To his amazement, he found that it was open and wandered inside. He could barely believe his eyes.

When he staggered back, he walked right into the Doctor. "Did you make that phone call?" he asked. "I... I..." The Doctor rolled his eyes. "I'll take that as a no." Rudi began to point to the inside of the TARDIS. "It's... it's... bigger... on the inside..." He began to stutter. "What is it?" The Doctor put a finger to his lips and Rudi looked insulted. "I promise you it's safe," said the Doctor. "It's how

we're going to find the creature behind this." Rudi looked gob-smacked. "Creature?" he repeated. "What do you mean

'creature'?" While Rudi had gone to make a telephone call, the Doctor had re-examined Arthur's wounds. He discovered to his horror a strange goo in the grooves of his injuries, a sludge he had removed from the body and placed in an airtight container. "This," he said, removing the container from his coat pocket, "is what I found left behind by the assailant." Rudi handled it with care. "What is it?" "It's venom, that when clawed into its victim, kills them instantly. Only one race is known for such a technique." "Technique?" Rudi didn't like his use of language. "Killing someone isn't a skill, Doctor. There isn't a technique behind murder."

The Doctor brought up a picture on the TARDIS scanner. It showed something that resembled an animal, a cross between a rhinoceros and a bear. Like a bear, it was able to stand on its hind legs and was covered in fur, but like a Rhino, had a horn that stretched out from the centre of its face and a considerably bulky body. For Arthur to have come

across that, Rudi knew he might otherwise have died of fright. "That's horrifying," he said, after a moments pause. "Well, the one out there is," answered the Doctor, looking back towards the doors. "How did it get here?" asked Rudi, as if he were Watson to the Doctor's Holmes. The Doctor tapped a string of buttons on the console. A video replaced the image of the creature, showing a dark mist rolling in from across the Atlantic. "But that's out there," said Rudi, reminding the Doctor that what he was watching seemed to reflect the weather forecast for the week. "Yes," said the Doctor. "Exactly. The creature that attacked your friend arrived when the storm did, it would seem. Tonight. I sensed there was something wrong here. This storm is alien." Rudi edged around the console. "How can a storm be alien?" The Doctor pointed to the screen.

It showed the creature arrive in a thunderstorm. A swirling mass of clouds and mist came down from the heavens, rolling in-land like it should, except nobody saw *how* it arrived, unlike any ordinary storm. "It's a Skitotski - a time storm surfer that

shouldn't be here. Let loose on a civilisation, it can use the strength of the storm to kill in its favour. When you were choking back there, that was the Skitotski mocking us as we were determined to interfere." Rudi looked alarmed. "All this is a little far fetched, don't you think? I mean, this is a joke!" he exclaimed, leaning back on the console as the Doctor strode past. It was he who was now insulted. "This is happening," he said. "Everything you see before you is real. Your friend, Arthur, is dead. How can you think what I'm telling you is make believe? None of this is child's play." "It's just hard to take in," said Rudi, looking over at the Doctor as he slouched in the corner in a chair, picking up a book to hide his face. Across from the console unit was a very unusual space, a black and white chequered floor adorned with ornaments, from all times and places. Rudi stepped down from the console. "If this is real, we can't ignore it, especially as you seem to be the only man alive who knows how we can find it." The Doctor looked out from behind the chair, putting the book down in his lap. "No, no, no, that's not what I said, I don't know what we're going to do, how we

can fight it. We just have to hope we can. If the Skitotski knew we were a threat to it, then 'it' will find us."

Rudi helped him up and the Doctor brushed himself down. "Come on, there's no time to lose." He took the goo he'd shown to his new found friend and carefully emptied the contents on to a slide, before inserting it into the console unit. "What are you doing now?" asked Rudi, watching the Doctor work. "We want to know how to fight the Skitotski, don't we?" he said, bringing information up on the monitor screen. "This substance is a toxin that can be reversed. It has its own antibodies fighting its deadly poison which we can use to turn on the creature. Unfortunately for us, if we step outside those doors, we're dead!" The shock on Rudi's face was clear to see. "Wha...wha...why?" he begged, crossing the room and peering out of the TARDIS. "Because of what I told you earlier, about the creature realising that we might be the only force to be reckoned with... and because it could choke us to death. We don't want to die, do we?" Rudi slammed the doors shut. "But that means we can never leave.

We're stuck inside here forever!" Rudi stood at the Doctor's side. The Doctor smiled and put a reassuring arm around his shoulder. "That's not true," he grinned.

The mist was like a thick fog, it hadn't lifted in a while. Since day had broken, the sun remained behind a sheet of grey cloud made worse by the showers of rain, sleet and snow felt across other parts of the country. "Freak weather indeed," thought Rudi, gearing up for the daunting task ahead. It was as if the weather, while working in the creature's favour, was merely waiting for the inevitable. The creature would know when to strike, like a spider biding its time in the dark recesses of the night. When the doors finally did open, the Doctor and Rudi emerged clad in black wearing gas masks, knee high boots and holding a strange device. "You never did say what that thing was for." The Doctor held what looked like a weapon up to the light atop of the TARDIS. "It emits the antibodies from the Skitotski's own genetic make-up into the air," he said, "reducing the toxins around us and making it safe to breath." He put it to good use and

Rudi watched the smog lift and begin to disappear, almost as if by magic. After a moment or so, he really began to notice the difference. It was the dawn of a new day. The pair had spent so long inside the TARDIS that time had flown by. Neither had noticed much of a change until the air was clean once more. "The antibodies should spread out across the atmosphere and eradicate the poisonous gasses found elsewhere across the planet, leading directly back to the source."

The streets were quiet and empty and there was nobody else around. Then, from out of nowhere, there appeared the creature Rudi had seen on the monitor. "Doctor, look!" he yelled, as it charged towards them, one final act of defiance. It came hurtling at them from down one end of the alley. "Back," yelled the Doctor. "Quickly." As they hurried backwards, the Doctor threatening to use the device, he could see the creature was suffering, it's body beginning to break down as the antibodies from the anti-toxin the Doctor had let loose, found their way back to the Skitotski. It seemed weak as if it knew it had only so much fight left in it, but it knew that it

would finish it off. It collapsed. The Doctor lowered his weapon and threw it to the ground. "How beautiful is that!" he declared. "See what we've destroyed! Sure, it came to feast on humanity, but it should never have ended up here in the first place." Rudi joined the Doctor as he knelt beside the Skitotski. "But it did come here to feast, Doctor, and it killed Arthur. Nothing can bring him back, and it might have gone on to kill others had we not interfered in its plans!" The Doctor looked over at Rudi and nodded reluctantly. "I just wish we could avoid bloodshed where and when possible. I try to, honest I do, but a creature such as this is so dangerous, who knows the strength it could harness from a storm as powerful as this, and what damage it could do to the city, let alone the planet."

Rudi got to his feet, looking around to see if they'd been noticed but there was noone in sight. "So, it's over?" he asked. "It sure looks like it. The Skitotski travel on their own, riding on the back of supernovas and asteroid belts far across space, creating time storms everywhere they go. They were once feared by countless species as planet wreckers.

I don't doubt they'd have wrecked this one, had we not stepped in to stop it." He stood up, turned to Rudi, and smiled. "It's over." He turned about and walked back towards his TARDIS, alone, not looking back. "Hey!" yelled Rudi, in utter astonishment. "You can't just go swanning off!" The Doctor looked round. "But Earth's safe, isn't it? The killer's been neutralized.

What else is there?" Rudi looked puzzled. "What about this mess around me, the Skitotski, the gun you've just abandoned to its fate! What if some thug wants to use to it to rob some place?" The Doctor back-tracked and zapped the gun with his screwdriver.

Sparks flew about all over the place. "Well," he said, casually. "That takes care of that. And the Skitotski, well... UNIT usually mop up my mess."

Rudi felt like this was the Doctor telling him he didn't care, that what he left behind didn't matter, and the people in his life came and went, without so much as a thank you, just to show that he couldn't have saved the Earth without them. It was as if it didn't matter that he'd mucked in and helped when

he'd been asked to.

The Doctor shrugged. "I'm sorry," he said. "I truely am. It's just... I thought maybe you'd get the hint!" Rudi was confused. "What hint?" The Doctor looked back at his machine. "I thought you'd wanna stick around, travel with me across time and space, that's what I do, after all." Rudi shook his head and kind'a wished he could. "I can't," he replied, sadly. "I've got a lot more on my plate than I ever did. I lost my mate to that monster," he said. "I don't even know how I'm going to deal with his loss, he meant everything to me, and..." The Doctor didn't wish to pry. He pulled Rudi dose and hugged him tight. "I'm sorry," he said, comforting his friend. "I'm so sorry." Rudi sobbed into the Doctor's coat as they stood in the empty street, the TARDIS in one corner, the Skitotski corpse in the other. The storm was over.

In the seconds that passed, military forces arrived to seal off the area. The Doctor and Rudi watched as troops ran up and down the street, guns in hand. "This is where we part company," he said, bidding Rudi farewell. "If ever you run into trouble

and you come across a familiar police telephone box, don't hesitate to come looking for me." He smiled, pulling the doors to open before stepping inside."Cheerio," said Rudi, waving. He looked over his shoulder as the men in the blue berrets strapped the Skitotski to a stretcher and bundled the body in a military ambulance. "Oh, and one more thing," said the Doctor, leaning out from the TARDIS, "I couldn't have done this without you. Thank you." In those few seconds, Rudi's opinion of the Doctor changed. He wasn't justa busy body who helped others in the face of danger, he cared, deep down, wanting to make a difference, for the better. The blue box began to disappear, the engines powering up and making a helluva noise, before the time machine vanished before Rudi's eyes. "Goodbye," he mouthed, staring up into the brightness of the sky, before walking back down the alley towards the highstreet. As he passed the soldiers, he looked back to where he'd waved off his friend, the Doctor. "Doctor Who?" he mused, and disappeared round a corner.

SIX GREEN BOTTLES

JAMIE HAILSTONE

Dusk was falling on the Yorkshire Moors as a battered, blue police box appeared from out of thin air on top of some deserted scrubland. For a few moments, a wheezing, groaning sound rang out across the empty hilltops, but there was nobody for miles to hear it. And then, as if by magic, the doors of the TARDIS flung open and out stepped a tall thin man, with a haunted look in his eyes.

The North East wind was cold and unforgiving, but that suited the Doctor just fine. He was in no mood for fun or frivolity.

For hundreds of years, the Doctor had fought

against evil in every corner of the cosmos. He had defended the weak and brought hope to everyone he had encountered, but lately, the Time Lord had grown restless. He was still the man the universe could depend on, but there were times when all he craved was his own company.

This was one of those moments.

The Doctor stood there, scanning the horizon. For as far as his eyes could see, there was nothing but hilltops and grassland. And with night falling, the clouds above him were a melodramatic shade of red.

"How very Emily Bronte," he muttered to himself, as the

Doctor briskly marched off in the first direction that took his fancy.

His Edwardian cape swayed in the wind, as the Doctor climbed a particularly steep hilltop. As he reached its summit, rain started to pour down from the heavens, drenching him from head to toe. The North Easterly winds were picking up too, and were doing little to alleviate the frown, which had taken up permanent residency on that long face of his.

But as the elements conspired against him on the exposed hilltop, the Time Lord readily accepted that he needed to find shelter, and he needed to find sooner, rather than later. As he looked around, he spotted a small ouiiamg uri me next ridge ahead.

Pulling his cape in a little tighter to protect himself, the Doctor set off in its direction.

Even though it was dark, the Doctor could start to make out the building's thatched roof and cobblestone walls. In the pale moonlight, a trail of smoke could be seen bellowing out of the chimney, and there was a large sign swinging in the wind, welcoming visitors to the tavern appropriately known as The End Of The World.

In an ideal world, this version of the Doctor wouldn't have been seen dead in a good, old-fashioned country pub. He preferred the finer things in life. But he was cold, drenched and miles away from the nearest hint of civilisation. Needs must.

Inside, it was exactly as the Doctor expected, or rather feared. Wooden beams ran along the low ceiling and the walls were full of faded pictures of farmers bringing in the harvest. A large stone

fireplace dominated the room, while the carpet on the floor had faded to almost nothing. It was the kind of quintessential image that graced a thousand jigsaws, except for one minor detail. There was not a soul in sight. The pub was completely empty.

The Doctor nonchalantly glided over to the bar and surveyed the various ales on offer: Hangman's Breath, Peat Bog and McGregor's Mead. Fearing the worst, he tapped the brass bell on the bar loudly and waited to be served.

Seconds later, the landlord, a burly gentleman by the name of Trevor McLatch, appeared from outback, clutching an empty pint glass.

"Evening sir, what will be it be?" he asked, pointing to the row of beer pumps in front of him.

The Doctor looked on aghast, like he was about to be physically sick.

"Tell me, my good man," he enquired in an accent so posh, it could cut diamonds. "Do you have anything, that in this life or possibly the next, might almost be described as wine?"

The landlord burst into laughter. "You're not from these parts, are you? Not to worry. I've got just

the thing."

"I very much doubt that," snapped the Doctor.

Paying no attention, the landlord lent down and retrieved a dusty bottle of red wine, which he placed on top of the bar.

"The folks in Hebden Bridge can't get of this stuff," he boasted, with a genuine sense of pride. "It's French, so you know it's good."

The Doctor picked up the bottle and studied it intently. He did not recognise the vineyard, Chateau Blue Lune, but at least the year (1984), gave him a good idea of when he had actually landed.

"It looks cheap, vulgar and undrinkable," he said, handing back the bottle. "Best make it a small one."

McLatch smiled as he poured the Doctor a glass. "I suppose you'll be wanting dinner, as well? The thing is, we are a bit busy tonight."

The Doctor's piercing eyes darted around the room. It was still quite, quite empty.

"Should I have booked ahead?" he replied, sarcastically.

"I know it looks a bit quiet now," said the landlord. "But there's a group of old soldiers who

come up here every year for a bit of a reunion. Tonight's their big night. They should be arriving any time now."

The Doctor gulped down his glass of wine in one shot. God it was awful. His body almost regenerated in disgust. The Time Lord looked again at the wine bottle on the bar and snatched hold of it, before the landlord could remove it. "Don't worry, you won't even know I'm here," he said, before retiring with the bottle to small table in the corner.

As the clock above the pub's fireplace struck eight o'clock precisely, a group of five middle-aged men appeared. The landlord greeted them all like long-lost friends and ushered them all to a large table, which he had lavishly prepared for them.

At first, the Doctor paid little attention to them. He was too busy trying to decided what was worse; Chateau Blue Lune or the truly vile Merlot on Straxos Major, which has been known to cause temporary blindness. It was a close run thing.

But as the evening wore on, the Doctor started to ease drop and listen into their conversation. Like a lot of men in their late fifties and early sixties, they

spent a lot of time talking about GTI cars, pensions and grandchildren. In a curious sort of way, they reminded the Doctor of the people he had known several lifetimes ago, back when he was a scientific advisor to a certain military organisation. The Time Lord not might have always seen eye-to-eye with his colleagues back then, but he always valued their friendship and loyalty.

"I'm so sorry. I do hope we're not disturbing you."

The Doctor looked up and saw one of the men, retired lieutenant Simon Fenwick, standing in front of him. Simon still had the air of a military man and was impeccably turned out in a blazer and golf club tie. "We only get to do this once a year now, and we can make a bit of noise when we do..."

Before he could continue apologising, another old soldier, who was much larger in every sense of the word, let out an enormous belch, much to the others' amusement. Looking suitably mortified, Simon shrugged his shoulder at the Doctor, as if to say "what can you do?".

"There's no need to apologise," said the Doctor,

who was rapidly thawing out from the cold, the wet and his own foul temper. "I used to serve with a fine squad myself. Splendid chaps, all of them!"

Simon's face lit up as he thought the Doctor meant he was a World War Two veteran himself. "Oh you must join us! Please I insist. What regiment did you service with?"

Feeling rather sheepish, the Doctor muttered something about it being a long story, and the UN.

"Hey lads, you'll never guess what!" yelled an excited Simon. "This man only used to be part of the United bleeding Nations peace keeping force!"

The Doctor's embarrassment turned up a notch as all the old men, turned round and greeted him like one of their own, and demanded he join them.

"It's an honour to meet you all, I'm the Doctor..." he spluttered, as he sat down to join them. The conversation quickly resumed. The Time Lord have met Marco Polo, Leonardo Da Vinci and H.G. Wells, but he had never played a round of golf in his life, and this soon put him at a serious disadvantage in the banter stakes.

As the tales of holes in one and sand bunker

escapes became more-and-more outlandish, the Doctor's attention switched the bottles of champagne on the table. He had seen the men come into the pub, clutching a bottle each, and was rather amused that despite the plethora of empty beer glasses and case loads of Chateau Blue Lune on the table, these particular bottles remained untouched.

Picking up one of the champagne bottles, the Doctor was stunned to see date on the labels - 1944.

"Good grief," he exclaimed. "This champagne is 40 years old. You're not actually going to drink this stuff, are you?"

The entire table burst into laughter.

"We might be drunk," said Simon, slapping the Doctor's back. "But we're not *that* drunk."

"They were the spoils of war," he added, as he took the bottle from the Doctor and carefully placed it back on the table. "They were a gift from a very grateful village in the South of France, after we sent the Third Reich packing back in the day. They said it was the least they could do."

The Doctor looked around the table. All the other men around the table were nodding.

"Of course, not all of us made out of there alive," continued Simon, rather sombrely. "Our Captain John Proctor died in the battle for that place, Mabert Sur Le Mer. He was a bloody good man. One of the best."

All the men raised their glasses and toasted the memory of their fallen comrade."Here's a picture of us the day we left for Normandy," said one of the other men, handing the Doctor a faded photograph. The Time Lord looked at it with great interest. There were six young men, standing around a tank. They were young, with smiles on their faces.

"That's Captain Proctor in the middle!" he added, pointing to the slim man, with short hair in the centre of the picture.

The Doctor was rather touched by the picture. "Did the sixth bottle belong to him?" he asked, pointing to the champagne in the centre of the table.

All the men went silent and gave the Time Lord a strange look.

"What are you talking about?" asked Simon, nervously. "There are only five bottles. One of each of us."

The Doctor looked round the table and counted them again.

"But there are six," he countered. "As day follows night, there most definitely are six bottles on the table in front of you."

The men all looked again at the table. They could see only five.

"I'm telling you, there is another bottle, right there here in the centre," said the Doctor as he stood up, and tried to grab the champagne in the middle of the table. But his hand went straight through it. He tried to pick it up again, but there was nothing physical there. It was like a mirage or a hologram that for some reason, only he could see.

"Most curious," muttered the Doctor, as he pulled out his trusty sonic screwdriver to examine it further. As he waved the screwdriver in front of the mysterious bottle it began to spin around on the spot, and then so did all the other bottles around the table.

The Doctor looked on, fascinated, as all six bottles started to glow. Then threads of red light poured out from each bottle and headed straight

into the faces of the men sat in front of them, who just were sitting there in a catatonic, trance-like state.

The Time Lord glanced again at his sonic screwdriver. It was registering the presence of a low-level psychic field, which was accessing their neural pathways. *But how, and more importantly why? What kind of alien hypnotises a bunch of men to meet at a deserted pub every year?*

He reached into his coat pocket and retrieved the mobile phone the Master had given him. The game was afoot and the Doctor had a new mystery to solve.

"Get the old girl ready," the Doctor instructed the Master. "We're going on a little trip back to World War Two."

The village of Mabert-Sur-Le-Mer was a large, and rambling collection of narrow roads, cobbled streets and old town houses, all perched precariously on top of a hill, near the Cote d'Azur. After hacking into various military computers, the Master had been able to pinpoint the exact date it had been liberated by the allied soldiers, 17th July 1944 and had found a suitably discreet place for the

TARDIS to materialise, away from prying eyes.

"Don't forget the earpiece," shouted the Master, as the Doctor left the confines of his time-traveling vessel.

Reluctantly, the Doctor nodded and put the device into his right ear.

"That's better," said the Master directly into the Doctor's ear. "Now there really is no escape from me now."

The Doctor tried his best to ignore the maniacal laughter that followed. It was either this or let his old foe leave the TARDIS. This was the lesser of all evils, and he could always switch it off. Besides the Doctor now had a spring in his step as he raced down the hill towards the village. There was nothing like the threat of imminent danger to make this particular Time Lord feel alive.

The village itself was suspiciously quiet. The Doctor had expected some signs of life. After all, the locals had just been liberated from the evil grip of the Third Reich. If ever there was a valid excuse for a celebration, then surely that was it. But the cobbled streets were completely and utterly devoid of life.

All the doors were locked shut, all the windows hidden beneath wooden shutters, and the only thing he could hear was the whistling of the summer breeze through the backstreets.

As the Doctor wandered around a myriad of alleyways, he began to wonder if he would ever he another soul, let alone the servicemen he had left attached to an alien probe 40 years in the future.

"Doctor!" interrupted the Master, through the earpiece. "I'm picking up signs of life about 500 metres away from you. They are moving quite quickly, though. A Time Lord of your advancing years might have a job to keep up with them. Spit spot."

The Doctor ignored that last comment, and immediately gave chase down the street. As he reached bottom of the road, he could hear faint murmurings to his left, so he started walking in that direction instead. At first, it was hard to make them out, but as he strode passed a series of deserted shops, they became louder and more distinctive. He stopped dead in his tracks and slowly turned to his right. There in front of him was the entrance to a

small alleyway. Even though it was now almost midnight, the Doctor could just about make three or four figures, skulking in the darkness.

"Bonjour!" cried out the Doctor, walking briskly towards the entrance. "I don't suppose any of you know the way to San Jose, by any chance? I appear to be the teensiest bit lost."

The figures stepped out of the darkness and gave the Time Lord icy glares. They were old men in raggedly clothes and caps. Not that the Doctor was one to make sweeping judgements, but he recognised a bunch of old sea dogs when he saw them. The man in front was carrying a large wooden stick, and was staring the Doctor right in the eyes, while the others were carrying large sacks over their shoulders.

"Vas t'en de mon chemin!" yelled out the man in front, as he pushed the Doctor back out into the street.

The band of brothers staggered out of the alley and faced the Time Lord. Then they turned their back to him and started muttering between them. For once, the Doctor could not tell what they were

saying. *How odd,* he thought. *The TARDIS translation circuit is not working. I wonder what on Earth they could be saying.*

The group stood there, nattering away for several minutes, totally ignoring the Doctor. Then a dark, primeval roar rang out across the night sky. The group immediately fell silent.

"Well it's about time," said the Doctor. "Now as I was trying to say...."

But one of the men help their hand up in the air, to signal the Doctor should be quiet.

"Silence, s'il vous plait," he whispered. There was an urgency in his voice, which suggested the Doctor do exactly as the old man said.

Then there was another roar, but even louder and more ferocious than the last. Even the Doctor was taken a little by surprise. Try as he might, he couldn't quite recognise the sound. It was definitely a creature of sorts, but not from this time-frame and possibly not even from this planet. Whatever it was, it appeared to be coming from the centre of town, and all the men turned round and looked down the road.

"A friend of yours?" asked the Doctor.

"L'ogre," said one of the men, absolutely petrified.

"Oui,", replied another, reluctantly.

Then another roar rang down the street. It was so loud and piercing, it caused the doors and shutters to rattle in its wake. The men all looked at each other again, dropped their bags and ran off in the opposite direction, leaving the Doctor standing there, wondering what on earth was making such a bizarre noise.

As the noise died down, the Doctor looked down at the bags the men had left behind. He reached into one of them and pulled out a stick of dynamite. *Well, somebody was planning one hell of a celebration tonight,* he thought to himself.

He rummaged further through the bags. They were all full of dynamite. *There must be enough explosive to level half the village in here. And what on Earth is making that infernal racket?*

Crouching down, the Doctor suddenly became aware of somebody standing right behind him. Ever so slowly, the Doctor stood up and looked over his

shoulder. Much to his utter astonishment, there was a massive, bald-headed creature towering over him. This creature was almost as tall as some of the buildings in the street, with two fang-like teeth coming out of its mouth. Its big, black eyes stared down at the Doctor, before the creature looked up at the sky above and let out an almighty battle cry, which must have been heard for miles around.

"Oh, now that's what I call an ogre!" said the Doctor, with a great big smile on his face, before he started running in the opposite direction, as fast as his legs could carry him.

The streets of Mabert-Sur-Le-Mer were built for long, leisurely evenings in the sun, accompanied with a fine glass of wine, and maybe even a cigar. They were definitely not constructed with Edwardian dinner suits or supersized ogres in mind, as the Doctor was now finding to his cost.

The Time Lord's cape swayed in the wind as he struggled to keep his distance from the ungainly creature, who was angrily pursuing him down the dark, narrow street. The ground was shaking underneath the Doctor as the ogre's feet pounded

the cobblestones, again and again, and again.

As the Doctor raced round another street corner, he suddenly found himself in the village square, which was a large open space with trees and a green, all overlooked by the local church. Pausing to catch his breath, he stopped to marvel at the splendour of it all. Seconds later, an equally breathless ogre caught up with him and slammed into a large tree next to the Time Lord.

"That's the problem with monsters today," quipped the Doctor, as he looked down at the ogre with pity. "Always barking up the wrong tree."

But the ogre was not so easily beaten. Picking itself up, the creature rose to its full height and started to beat his chest, like a gorilla about to go into battle.

"We just don't talk anymore," said the Doctor, jumping a few steps back, onto the grass.

The ogre roared out again and began pounding the floor with his huge hands.

"You know, the locals are not going to thank you for what you're doing to this beautiful lawn," added the Doctor, getting out of the way. "Where are they

going to play boules now?"

The ogre started to tear into the ground in front of him and hurl it up into the air. Looking around, the Doctor quickly realised there was nowhere else to run too, certainly not in those Edwardian shoes.

"I suppose this is it," he muttered to himself. "Crushed to death in the South of France. Well, there are worse ways to go."

Suddenly, a noise rang out across the square, which halted the ogre in his tracks. The Doctor swirled around, and saw a figure in military uniform, standing at the doors of the church, clutching an enormous weapon.

"Go back to where you came from!" the man yelled out, before firing the gun again up in the air. The Doctor looked on amazed, as the ogre dropped his shoulders, turned round and sheepishly walked away into the darkness.

Feeling rather grateful, the Doctor rushed up to the man and tried to introduce himself. "How do you do? I'm the Doctor..."

But before he could say anymore, the man grabbed his arm and dragged the Doctor back inside

the church.

"I don't know what your game is, but you're lucky you didn't get yourself killed," he shouted at the Doctor, as he closed the church's large wooden doors behind them. "The locals round here have learned the hard way that you don't antagonise these creatures. You just run as fast as you can, and find shelter wherever you can."

The Doctor looked around. It really was a most impressive church, with huge stained windows and rows of wooden pews. Then he began to pay attention to his rescuer - a short man, with greasy black hair and a beard. The man's uniform was in keeping with the time period, but the weapon he was clutching was clearly from another time, and another galaxy altogether.

Tm terribly sorry, I came here looking for a platoon of five British soldiers," he said. "They were sent here to liberate the village. I don't suppose you've seen them?"

The soldier just shook his head. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a cigarette, which he lit up and started to smoke with some considerable

gusto.

"You're too late," he said in a raspy voice, full of remorse. "They all died when those creatures first showed up. They cornered them on the steps of the old town hall and pulled them apart, limb from limb."

Then he stopped, and stared up at the large wooden cross on the church wall. "I was their commanding officer and I'm ashamed to say, the only one to make it out alive," he added, wistfully.

"You wouldn't be Captain John Proctor, by any chance?" asked the Doctor, sensing the man's sorrow.

Captain Proctor nodded. But for some reason, the Doctor was not convinced. He could still remember the picture the soldiers had showed him in the pub. Their Captain Proctor was young, slim and fresh faced. This man was short, stumpy and had a distinctly lived in appearance. He also had quite an impressive collection of weaponry, lying on one of the church pews.

The Doctor walked over, picked one of the guns up and studied it intently. "I must say, this Staxan

Pistol is in remarkably good condition. And look at these cluster mines. You've got quite the collection of 24th century armoury. Now who are you really?"

Proctor gave him a look that suggested the Doctor should put up and shut up, but the Time Lord carried on regardless. "And that rifle you're carrying, if I'm not mistaken, it's a Peterson 5000 Laser Rifle with an endoscopic night vision sight on the top. You don't see many of those this side of the Andromeda Galaxy, especially since the 6000 came out."

"Personally I prefer the 8000," interrupted the Master through the Doctor's earpiece.

As quick as a flash, Proctor raised the rifle and aimed it squarely at the Doctor's head.

"My real name isn't important, just call me Proctor," he hissed. "And you've certainly got my attention. Now who did you say you were again?"

The Doctor raised his hands to surrender. "I'm the Doctor and let's just say, that like you, I'm not exactly from these parts, but I can promise you that I'm here to help you and everyone else in this godforsaken place."

Proctor smiled and nodded. There was something about the Doctor he trusted. He slowly lowered his rifle and put it back on the pew next to him, causing the Doctor to breathe a huge sigh of relief. Proctor leaned into his coat pocket and pulled out a packet of cigarettes. He opened the lid, but after seeing the packet was empty, he angrily threw it down on the floor and then stomped his boots on it.

"Some call me a soldier of fortune," he said, turning to face the Doctor. "Personally I like to think of myself as a more of an entrepreneur..."

"A heavily-armed entrepreneur," interrupted the Doctor.

But Proctor paid no attention. He was too busy wondering where his next packet of cigarettes was coming from. "A young lady by the name of Marie Laveau had stolen some particularly valuable merchandise from a cartel in the Lupuloid sector. And they are offering a considerable number of credits for anyone who can reunite them with the missing gear, and Miss Laveau herself."

"Define merchandise," enquired the Doctor, who

was beginning to have an uneasy feeling about the whole situation.

Proctor responded with a glance that suggested the Doctor did not really want to know.

"Perhaps we should start with something simpler," said the Doctor, changing tack. "Like how an intergalactic mercenary came to be wearing the jacket of a dead British soldier."

Proctor held both his hands up, signalling his readiness to surrender.

"I was tracking Miss Laveau through this quadrant when her ship started to veer off course," he explained. "I didn't think much of it to begin. I just assumed she was trying to give me the slip, but as time went on, I could see she was in trouble. As we got nearer to Earth, things got even worse and then she appeared to lose all control. Her ship plummeted into the atmosphere and I gave chase. Nobody had warned me there was a war on, and my ship soon found itself under attack from both sides. It was all I could do to get her down to the ground in one piece. I was lucky to make it out alive."

He paused for a second to gather his thoughts.

"After I hid the wreckage and I went in search of help," he added. "Instead, I found those guys surrounded by German troops on the outskirts of Paris. Let's just say I got them out of a spot of bother. They lost their own captain a few days before, up in some place called Normandy."

The Doctor nodded sagely.

"You should have seen them, Doctor," added Proctor, whose voice was starting to waver. "They were no more than boys. I've fought a lot of battles. It's no way to live, but the one I've never forgotten is *that look.* When all hope is lost, you can see it there, in a person's eyes. And I saw it, Doctor. I saw it in every last one of them. They were not just scared. They were broken. I made a vow to them, there and then, that I was going to get all out of this mess alive."

Tears started to stream down Proctor's face. He sat down on one of the pews, and looked up at the Doctor, as if searching for forgiveness.

"So I said I would be their commanding officer," he added. "Of course, it wasn't long before my scanner picked up Marie Laveau's signal. She had

holed herself up in a chateau just up the road from here. I told them the boys they would be rich beyond their wildest dreams. It was six of us versus one of her. How hard could it be? But then she activated the merchandise. We didn't stand a chance."

Proctor bowed his head and closed his eyes.

"I'm sure you can figure out the rest," he said, softly.

If the Doctor had been human, he would probably have said something like "it wasn't your fault" and patted Proctor sympathetically on the shoulders. But he wasn't. He was the Doctor. He stood in front of the soldier for a few moments, before concentrating on the arsenal of space-age weapons lying on the pews behind Proctor.

"What was your plan?" asked the Doctor, bluntly.

"My what?"

"Your plan," replied the Doctor. "You could have walked away. No one would have blamed you, certainly not when you are up against creatures of that magnitude. Instead, you have holed yourself up in a church in the centre of town with enough

firepower to stop a battle cruiser in its tracks. You obviously had a plan, and the quicker you tell me what it is, the better it will be for all of us."

Proctor leaned back on the pew and sighed. "You know that creature who chased you into the square? Well, there are five of them. She has them guarding her, day and night. I persuaded some of the locals to come here tonight, they were going to draw them away with a series of explosions around the village, while I made my way to the chateau, where she is hiding and finish this once and for all."

"I've heard worse," replied the Doctor. Admittedly, most of them were his.

"But they should have been here by now," added Proctor, ruefully. "Something must have happened to them."

The Doctor's line of thought was suddenly interrupted by the sound of the Master, coughing loudly down his ear pierce.

"Yes, they had the misfortune to run into you, remember?" he said, caustically.

"Oh shut up," snapped the Doctor.

Turning his attention to the matters at hand, the

Doctor looked Proctor squarely in the eye. "I must just be able to provide you with a distraction, now tell me again about these monsters."Standing on the steps of the church, Proctor took one last look around. He looked exhausted. The square was full of debris from the ogre's shouting match with the Doctor. *This had been such a simple job,* he told himself. *How could hove gone so spectacularly wrong?*

"Are you sure this is going to work?" he asked the Doctor.

The Time Lord just smiled. "Trust me, you've never seen a light show like this one. We're ready when you are. Master..."

Back in the TARDIS, his old foe was frantically running around the control console, getting everything ready. With the final element in place, the Master flicked the dematerialisation switch and stood back, looking suitably pleased with himself.

"Keep your eyes on the centre of the square," the Doctor told Proctor.

A familiar rasping, moaning sound started to reverberate around the square, causing the branches on the trees to flap around. In the centre, the outline

of the TARDIS could clearly be seen, but instead of blue wood, it was glowing like a beacon.

"Now, I'm particularly proud of this," said the Master, triumphantly, as he pressed another button on the console.

A large multi-coloured beam began to fly out of the small lamp on top of the Tardis, puncturing the midnight sky.

"All right, now I'm impressed," said Proctor, as witnessed the Master's light show.

As the dazzling display continued, they could hear the ogres begin to roar in the distance. "You better go now," whispered the Doctor. "Leave them to me."

"Remember what I said. Doctor," said Proctor as he walked down the steps. "Don't kill them, please. I need them alive."

Proctor nodded and walked off into the shadows, leaving the Doctor, the Master and the TARDIS to face the ogres.

"The Doctor will see you now!" shouted the Time Lord, as the Tardis started to glow all the colours of the rainbow. It wasn't long before the roars became

louder, and louder still.

"Doctor, I'm picking up five life forms converging on the square," warned the Master, checking the scanner. "And they appear to be gathering speed."

At the far end of the square, the Doctor could clearly make out one of the creatures in silhouette. The ogre was soon joined by another, and another. A few seconds later, all five ogres were standing there in a line, facing the Doctor. Each one looked as bloodthirsty and violent as the next. They roared out in unison, like they were announcing their arrival.

Tthe Doctor stood his ground. "It's over to you know," he whispered to the Master.

With the ogres pre-occupied, Proctor ran through the streets, towards the chateau. He bit his lip as he heard the ogres cry out in the distance. *I should not have left that crazy fool on his own like that,* he told himself.

The chateau itself was up a long and steep hill. Proctor approached it cautiously, but was relieved to see its large wooden doors were unguarded. *The Doctor's plan, mad as it was, had clearly worked.*

Whether the strange man was still alive was another matter, Proctor thought Proctor pushed the doors open and marched into the chateau's spacious courtyard. He gazed around for a second. There were stairs to his left and right, which led up to the next floor and a balcony.

"Nobody else needs to get hurt tonight," he shouted, clutching his laser rifle. "Just give me back what I want and I'll be on my way."

There was no response, so Proctor walked into the middle of the courtyard and tried again. "It doesn't have to end this way."

The wooden doors behind him suddenly slammed shut, causing Proctor to almost jump out of his skin.

"Do you really think you can threaten me?" said a seductive voice from the shadows. "What a pathetic little man you truly are.

Take one more step and I'll crush you, just like I crushed those poor little boys you sent to fight me."

Proctor swung round. He was trying to figure out which direction the voice was coming from. Sweat began to trickle down his short, round face.

Was she in front of him, or behind? He couldn't tell.

"You should have killed me when you had the chance," he said, defiantly, but Marie just cackled.

"But where's the fun in that?" she teased. "I made the hunter the hunted. That's much more satisfying, don't you think."

Marie then stepped out of the shadows in front of Proctor and faced him head on. Wearing a tight black dress, she was an elegant woman with long, flowing blonde hair. She could see Proctor was hesitating, so she taunted him even more.

"Oh dear, you're not one of those men who can't hit a woman, are you?" she laughed. "How very predictable."

With lightning reflexes, Proctor raised his rifle up and pulled the trigger tight. But the bullet bounced off an invisible barrier in front of Marie and ricocheted around the courtyard, hitting the wall behind him instead.

"Oh I probably should have mentioned the force field," she said, pretending to look innocent. "Women's prerogative and all that! By the way, did the cartel give you a full list of all the merchandise I

stole? No? Quelle damage..."

Marie snapped her fingers and an overbearing pain hit Proctor right between the eyes, calling him to drop his rifle and fall to the ground in agony. Proctor had been shot many times before, but this felt like every fibre of his soul was being shredded into a million pieces.

"It's true what they say," said Marie, gloating. "An astral detonator will always hit you wear it hurts, which in your case is your head, or rather what's left of it!"

But Proctor was biding his time. As he sat on the cold courtyard floor, on his hands and knees, he reached into his coat pocket. His hands were trembling from the effect of the grenade, but they were still able to grab hold of something. With one press of a button, a wave of energy sent Marie flying to the floor.

Proctor rose to his feet. "You're not the only one with bells and whistles, love," he said, catching his breath. "Now where was I?"

Before Marie could respond, the chateau doors behind him swung open again. Both she and Proctor

swung round, dumbfounded to see the Doctor standing there, surrounded by five large and hungry-looking ogres.

"Right boys," declared the Doctor, his voice full of impatience and anger. "I think it's time we put this particular problem to bed, don't you?"

The Time Lord snapped his fingers and at his command, the ogres marched into the courtyard. Two of them grabbed Marie. Another two grabbed Proctor and the other ogre stood by the Doctor, guarding him.

"You should have told me the truth about these creatures right from the start," said the Doctor, angrily. "You could have saved yourself a lot of hardship, Captain Proctor."

The Time Lord marched up to Proctor and looked him dead in the eye. "I will admit it took me a while to get there. When we first met, you could have easily shot this fine creature?"

The Doctor pointed to the ogre next to him and continued: "As you said, you're a mercenary. Killing people is an occupational hazard. You're either the worst marksman this side of the Milky Way, or you

deliberately choose not to harm this creature. Now why is that, I imagine?"

Proctor squirmed in the grip of the two ogres, as he tried his best to avoid the Doctor's glare. But it was no use. He could feel the Doctor bearing down on him.

"And then there's you, Miss Laveau!" said the Doctor, as he pointed to accuse her. "You didn't risk the wrath of a blood-thirsty cartel of criminals for a fistful of ogres, did you?"

The Time Lord stared at her. "You know, if this was an Agatha Christie novel, I'd be telling you which one of you is the murderer by now."

"Doctor," interrupted the Master, through the communications link in his ear. "I think I've found what you're looking for. It's in the wooden chest underneath the balcony, to your left."

The Time Lord smiled to himself as he walked confidently to the old chest and lifted it open. "I really should have been a detective, you know. All I needed was the right moustache. A quantum manipulator! How terribly quaint. No wonder the TARDIS translation circuits were not working earlier

with all the interference these things cause."

The Doctor reached into chest and pulled out the large black console. "You'll have to bear with me, I'm afraid. I haven't used one of these since my academy days..."

"And you failed that particular module, as I recall," muttered the Master, knowing full well that he passed it with flying colours, naturally.

Ignoring him, the Doctor started to press various buttons and adjust a few deals on the box. "And hey presto!"

The bodies of the five ogres started to glow with crackling energy. The monsters dropped Marie and Proctor to the floor and their oversized bodies convulsed. Just as the Doctor had expected, they started to slowly change shape. First their massive fangs faded away. Then they shrunk back down to normal human size.

"That's the real reason you didn't want to kill that ogre in the square, isn't it?" said the Doctor, looking at Proctor. "They didn't kill your men. They *are* your men."

The five young men all collapsed to the floor,

shivering with shock.

"Which brings us neatly back to you, Miss Laveau!" shouted the Doctor, snapping his fingers and pointing at her. "You put them under your control, for your own devious ends. Fortunately, I know a man who's abilities in this arena far outshine yours."

Listening in, the Master duly noted the compliment.

These things don't happen every day. He had to make the most of them.

"You're too kind," he replied, grinning from robotic ear to robotic ear.

Turning his attention back to the matter at hand, the Doctor continued: "Now listen to me, the pair of you. You're both equally matched. You would have reached a stalemate, sooner or late. I'm just forcing the situation, that's all. Think of me as a benign dictator, with a fine line in sartorial elegance."

The Doctor swished his cape in the air, for full dramatic effect.

"Marie, you are going to undo all the damage you have done in this village," he said, staring at her.

"A few well placed physic grenades should erase the memories of the last 48 hours for the locals. If we're really lucky, they will put their groggy heads down to some celebratory hangovers and forget all about it."

Crestfallen, but accepting her fate, Marie nodded, solemnly.

"But it will take more than few psychic grenades to fix this lot," said Proctor, pointing to the men, cowering on the floor.

"Look at them, Doctor. Their heads were a mess before she possessed them. What's left of them now?"

"I might have something for them," said Marie. She walked to the chest and pulled a small metal case. She opened it up and it revealed five small electronic devices.

"It's a portable psychic relay network," explained the Doctor. "It's powered by Andoran amulets. You can use them reprogram the minds of a group of people. You can take their memories away, given them new ones. It's crude, but effective."

Proctor leapt off the floor and snatched them off

her, desperate to have a look himself.

"Doctor, I think you should have a look those," interjected the Master. "A very close look."

The Doctor held out his hand and Proctor reluctantly handed them over.

"And they have a cloaking device," boasted Marie. "You can disguise them as anything you like, so the person never need know they are there."

"You make quite the salesman," noted the Doctor, who was still studying them with great interest. "They're quite small though. I imagine they would need to be replenished quite regularly."

Marie nodded. "Every year or so," she said, trying to be helpful. The penny was starting to drop in the Doctor's mind. These devices were indeed the 'bottles of champagne' he had seen in the pub forty years hence.

"Well that's it," said a delighted Proctor. "Set the network up!"

"I wouldn't let him use them if I were you," whispered the Master. "Those Andoran amulets are notoriously unreliable, particularly in the wrong hands.

The Doctor nodded. "I suppose you have a better idea," he replied.

"As a matter of fact, I do! It's called post-traumatic hypnotherapy. Give me five minutes with those soldiers and they will be new men."

Seconds later, the TARDIS began to materialise in the courtyard. Marie and Proctor looked at astounded, as the police box appeared in front of their very eyes. Then its doors swung opened wide.

"Now gentlemen, if you will just come this way," the Master beckoned to the fallen soldiers. With the support of Marie, Proctor and the Doctor the weary men were helped inside.

Standing in front of the soldiers, the Master addressed. "Now don't worry," he said. "This will not hurt one bit. And I guarantee very soon you will all feel better. I guarantee it. Alterali, I am the Master and you will obey...."

Proctor and Marie looked on as the Master started to hypnotise the men, and undid all the psychological damage of the last few days. At Proctor's behest, he also removed any memories they might have had about him, and gave them new

ones about how their Captain had died, saving them as they marched into the village.As the Master put them all under a trance, the Doctor took Proctor and Marie back into the courtyard for a pep talk.

"I want you to destroy all these contraptions," he ordered, pointing to the collection of weapons on the courtyard floor.

"Trash them. Smash them. I don't care. Just get rid of them. And then get out of my sight, both of you !"

Suitably admonished, Proctor and Marie looked at each other and nodded.

"Oh wait, there is one other thing," barked the Doctor.

"Are there any pockets in that coat you haven't stuffed with cigarettes?"

Unsure, Proctor patted the jackets various pockets with his hands. He soon found something in the inside left pocket, a battered and muddied envelope, which he handed over to the Doctor. It was a letter from a young lady, care of a pub on the Yorkshire Moors, called The End Of The World.

"Fascinating," muttered the Doctor, as he handed

the envelope back to Proctor. "If you're ever in the neighbourhood, you should think about visiting this fine establishment. I can heartily recommend it."

The young men began to walk out, through the TARDIS doors. They had walked in emotional wrecks, but were now smiling, relaxed and renewed.

"Excellent, well I think our week here is done," said the Doctor, walking back towards the TARDIS, with a triumphant spring in his step.

Forty years later, the TARDIS rematerialized outside The End Of The World pub on the Yorkshire Moors. The Doctor walked in to find the five men he had left behind, sitting there, laughing and joking. The only champagne bottles on the table were empty, having been consumed some time ago.

Smiling to himself, he walked over to the bar and rang the bell for attention. The landlord, Trevor McLatch, appeared, clutching a rather expensive-looking bottle of wine. Without saying a word, he poured the Doctor a glass, which the Time Lord readily accepted.

"A most remarkable vintage," said the Doctor as he swirled the wine around in its glass. "And most

ingenious too."

McLatch nodded.

"Tell me," asked the Doctor. "There's a bio-dampener field around this building. How did I miss that the first time I was here?"

The publican shrugged his shoulders. Underneath the bar were a series of switches. He flicked one of them and suddenly his appearance changed. Instead of the rosy-cheeked landlord, a much older, and shorter man with a grey beard was standing the behind the bar.

Proctor winked at the Doctor. He pressed the switch again and instantly he was the trusty landlord, McLatch again.

"I'm still looking out for my men," he whispered to the Doctor, as he poured him another glass. "Like any commanding officer would."

Smiling, the Doctor raised his glass to the landlord. "I'll drink to that."

DARK MEDIA

KARA DENNISON

'*This... is quite likely the last message I'll ever send. The Rain Queen calls to me. But I'm not afraid anymore. I'm... I'm happy. I'm excited. I'm ready. I'm ready to serve her. To hear her words. To be with her. I've played her game long enough. It's time now. Please, my queen, welcome me into your world! Take me to y... AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!"*

"Another solicitor?" the Master asked, quirking an eyebrow.

'They *do* always call right when you've sat down for dinner, don't they?"

The Doctor hung up the phone slowly. "Wrong

number," he murmured. "Probably a transmission gone awry. Nothing to do with me."

"But you want to find them. Whoever they are."

"It was a boy." The Doctor's voice cracked. "A teenager, from the sound of him. So young. So in danger."

The Master raised a hand to the controls. *"So* I can assume we're going to triangulate the source of the call?"

"No." The Doctor shook his head, running a shaky hand over his slicked-back hair. "No, not anymore. I'm past that."

The Master smirked, but said nothing.

"Besides!" The Doctor's voice cut through the air in a

mock-cheery shout. "I'm sure we have somewhere else to be.

Some other *terribly* important errand we're being sent on." He spun to face the Master with a forced smile just as the TARDIS shuddered to a stop, her doors flinging themselves open behind him. "Only the most dangerous and death-defying missions for us, of course. The worst of the worst. The sinkholes

of terror. The wars. The invasions."

"The children's birthday parties."

"The... what?"

The Master tilted his head towards the doors. Still in his dramatic oratory pose, the Doctor looked over his shoulder. Through the doors was an idyllic little back garden, littered with bored-looking children kicking at balloons and swatting flies off pizza.

"Aha." The Doctor sniffed, straightening his jacket as he strode toward the doors. "I see the punishment is going at full tilt now: they're renting me out as a child-minder."

"Don't be gone long," the Master twittered mockingly. The Doctor sneered and shuffled out into the garden, closing the door behind him.

It was temperate out, the pleasant vague coolness of spring. The children, primarily boys, didn't pay him any notice as he wove through the group. There was an enthusiastic water pistol fight playing out in one corner of the garden; the rest looked overall unimpressed with the whole affair as they occupied themselves with food or awkward conversation.

"Oh, *there* you are."

The Doctor spun to face the speaker - a woman in her forties, dressed as though she were working a business meeting rather than overseeing a children's party. The smartphone in her hand, which she kept flicking her gaze down toward sternly, only heightened the effect. Something about her low-maintenance haircut set the Doctor on edge.

"Yes," he said flatly, "here I am."

The woman frowned. "You're late."

"I highly doubt that."

But he found himself ignored as the woman stepped into the crowd of children. "All right, everyone, gather 'round. The magician is here!"

"The what now?" the Doctor spat, but no one heard him. All the kids dropped what they were doing and sat down in a semicircle on the grass, looking at him expectantly.

"I beg your pardon?" he hissed at the woman as she approached him again.

"We were expecting something a bit more traditional, but you'll do. It's interesting. Sort of a Wizard of Oz-y, mad scientist-y look." She brushed

an imaginary speck off his jacket. "Go on, then. We haven't got all day. They're being picked up in half an hour."

Before he could protest again, she'd scurried back into the house. He huffed, gritting his teeth. "A magician. Honestly. If I *ever* call myself a magician, I'll have someone throttle me soundly."

One of the children stared at him especially acutely. Not sure what to do, he approached the crowd. "Right, which of you is the guest of honor?"

The boy who'd been staring - eleven, twelve years old at best-raised his hand. "Me, sir."

"Sir. Sir, I like that. What's your name?"

"Jeff, sir."

"Right, Jeff. Well, I'm the Doctor, and I'm apparently here to do magic. So. Er." He patted down his pockets, looking for something that might vaguely amuse the children. At a loss, he tucked his right thumb between his first two fingers and held his hands up. Give 'em the oP Detachable Thumb. That was always a crowd pleaser.

"Ta-da!"

Silent stares.

The Doctor tried the move again. "The... it's... come on, I'm pulling my thumb apart! That deserves something!"

A girl in the back gave a slow clap.

"Kids these days. No sense of wonder."

"Do a real trick!" snapped a boy next to Jeff, holding a paper plate with a slice of sheet cake plopped on it.

"A real trick, eh? Give me your plate." The Doctor waved his hand, and the boy handed his cake over. Pinching the small square of cake daintily between his fingers, the Doctor shoved it into his mouth.

'There," he said around a mouthful of chocolate, wiping crumbs from the corners of his mouth with his fingers. "I've only made your cake disappear "

"You're rubbish!" the boy shouted. A few of the other children added their voices to the protest, one throwing an empty paper cup. In the midst of the noise, Jeff got up silently and disappeared into the house. But it wasn't the cranky trudge of an annoyed birthday boy so much as a covert sneak. There was something else at work here - to Jeff, the Doctor's

party foul had likely been little more than a cover for a convenient escape.

The Doctor ducked a paper plate aimed squarely at his head. "Show's over, kiddies. Don't forget to tip your server... then pick her up again." He picked his way through the crowd, wincing as a few kicked at his shins. Fortunately, the hostess was nowhere to be seen. He slipped through the large sliding doors of the hosting house into the sitting room, then looked around. The blips and bleeps of a video game met his ears. He followed.

The bedroom the Doctor poked his head into was dark, save for the sharp light from a small television screen sat on top of a pair of plastic crates. Atop the television was a boxy gaming system, a relic of the 80s, with a game cartridge sticking out of it. Seated in the middle of the floor amid piles of discarded laundry was Jeff, his thumbs hammering away at a video game controller.

"Not a fan of the tricks?" the Doctor ventured.

Jeff continued to hammer away.

The Doctor sighed and sat down on the unmade bed a few feet away. Jeffs face was somber and

concentrated in profile, colored lights flickering harshly across it.

"Believe it or not, I didn't mean to ruin your birthday."

"My brother's not here," Jeff said apathetically, "so my birthday was already pretty ruined." It was the saddest sound in the world: a child resigned to his situation. Though what that situation was was anyone's guess; given his tone of voice, it didn't sound like the brother in question had just casually skipped town. Jeff was clearly buried in the game, seemingly unwilling to entertain even the mere idea of explaining.

The Doctor turned his head to look at the screen. The game Jeff was fighting away at was as archaic - relatively speaking - as the system from which it played. It was blocky, glitchy, with discordant sound effects and aggressively computerized music that sounded more like the soundtrack to a descent into madness than a video game.

"What're you playing there?"

Jeff didn't remove his eyes from the screen. "T*he Tale of Amé-Ojo.*"

The Doctor pursed his lips. "Never heard of it. Looks a bit old"

"Came out in the 80s. It's my brother's." He paused, both his words and his thumbs, closing his eyes and blinking back tears.

Then his thumbs twitched back into action, as did the character on the screen. "He found it at a rummage sale. There's people online who say it's... cursed."

"Do you believe that?"

No answer.

The Doctor looked back at the television. The setting of the game was a garish, pixelated wasteland, littered with what appeared to be crumbled stone pillars that scrolled to the left as Jeff's avatar progressed. The avatar was a small, vaguely humanoid hero, slashing a sword at the various creatures that attacked from the right-hand side of the screen. The monsters exploded into gory red bursts of pixels, accompanied by computerized screeches, as the score in the top right corner spun ever higher.

"Are you winning?"

"No," Jeff said, and there was an odd weightiness in his voice. "Not yet. But I will."

The scrolling came to a halt as Jeffs avatar entered a spacious, crystalline cave. Waiting inside was a bizarre half-lion, half-scorpion creature with an oddly human face. Large words came up on the screen in shaky red letters: *NOW IT IS THE TIME TO YOU DYING!*

"Quality translation," the Doctor muttered as the music escalated in to a madcap, off-key battle anthem.

"This is the Chief Brave of the Scorpus Pride," Jeff explained as he began thrashing away at the beast. "I can never beat him."

The Doctor watched the heated battle with lidded eyes. "Ugly blighter, isn't he?"

The music and sound effects stopped, and Jeffs avatar fell still; Jeff smashed his thumbs uselessly against the control pad to no avail. On the screen, the Chief Brave of the Scorpus Pride turned his head one frame at a time, each movement accentuated with a synthesized beat, until he was looking the Doctor in the eye. His pixelated mouth fell open in a

gaping scowl, his eyes turning suddenly to glowing points of red, as more letters came up on the screen with a series of beeps.

YOU SHOULD NOT HA VE SAID THA T.

The game received the Doctor's undivided attention.

Jeff dropped his controller. "He heard you."

"Good," said the Doctor, his voice dropping, "then he'll hear me when I say he's a pitiful show-off, too."

The letters disappeared, and the grotesque face of the creature contorted into a crazed grin. A computerized chuckle resonated from the television's speakers as the vaguely human head bobbed jerkily up and down.

YOUR BROTHER IS MINE. YOU ARE NEXT.

"It's true!" Jeff whispered. "Evan was right! The game *is* cursed! It is, and it has-"

"Now look here, young man." The Doctor pointed squarely between Jeffs eyes, summing up what little paternal authority he could still find in himself. "There is no such thing as a 'cursed' game, or a 'cursed' anything. Curses are cleverly thought-

out ruses to keep the superstitious at bay, and..."

His voice trailed off as he heard the now-familiar blipping that denoted text appearing on the screen. Slowly, he turned his head to look.

AND YOU WILL FOLLOW.

Then, in progressively larger letters, glitching and bugging as they overlapped and filled the screen:

TIME

LORD

The Doctor's face contorted. He reached for the cartridge sticking out of the game system, ripping it out without hesitation. The screen went black.

"What did you *do?!"* Jeff shrieked, his voice cracking.

"Potentially saved your life." The Doctor slapped the cartridge against the palm of one hand. "Though if you'd like your life to remain saved, you're going to have to be a bit more forthcoming about this game... and your brother."

The introductions were done, the requisite initial spatial disbelief expressed, and now Jeff was seated in an overstuffed chair in the TARDIS's main control

room.

"Tea?" asked the Master.

"S-Sure," Jeff stammered.

The Master turned to the Doctor. "You heard the boy. He wants tea."

"Ha." The Doctor half-sneered a smile. "Not your housekeeper."

"Not *yours,* either."

"I'll swap your face while you're recharging, don't think I won't. Got a nice Sam Tyler model in the back I've been dying to try out." The Doctor stalked off through a doorway.

Jeff turned to the Master curiously. "What did he mean by that?"

"Idle threats. He's not a very nice person, you know." The Master's tone was conversational as he leaned his elbows on the top of Jeffs chair. "Plays like he's a kind fellow, but really-"

"No, I mean about you recharging and switching your face."

The Master shrugged. "Hazards of android life."

Jeff shrank down in his chair as the Doctor returned with a cup and saucer. "Christening blend.

The best I've got. Milk and sugar?"

"Y-Yes."

"Oh, good, because that's how I made it." He put the teacup down on a small table next to Jeff's chair and sat opposite him on the very edge of another. "Now. Your brother."

Jeff picked up the teacup, staring into the milky, opaque liquid. "He's... not here."

"So I gathered. Where is he?"

"He's... in the game."

The Doctor glanced at the *Tale ofAmé-Ojo* cartridge, which was currently wrapped in three layers of reflective fabric and a few rounds of duct tape. "Inside the cartridge, you mean?"

Jeff nodded, then shook his head, then shrugged. "I... I don't know. But it's the only place he *could* be."

"We're getting nowhere," the Master griped, striding away from Jeffs chair. "Why not start at the beginning? Makes it easier to follow."

"He has a point." The Doctor reached into the green inner lining of his jacket, producing an Aero bar from a hidden pocket and tearing into it. "How did this all start? A rummage sale, you said?"

"Mm. Well, there'd been someone talking on some forum Evan's on about this game, and how it's cursed and it drives people crazy and then they disappear. He thought it was an ARG-"

"Argh?" This from the Master.

"You know, one of those sort of scary stories they do online. Where you think it's just a random post but then they start mentioning ghosts or monsters or haunted DVDs or whatever and it gets all creepy and people have to break codes to figure out what's happening. Someone had put up videos of them playing it, and everyone figured it was just really really good programming. But then Evan actually found the game and bought it, cuz he figured oh, the *game* is real, but the story about it being cursed isn t.

The Doctor swallowed a bite of chocolate. "And then?"

Jeff took another sip of the tea. "It... he did videos about it. Looking at those might help more than me just telling you."

The Master immediately went to a keyboard on the TARDIS console. "How can I find them?"

"Just look up his username on YouTube.

RainQueenKiller."

The Master typed in the name, waited, then shook his head. "It's not turning up anything."

"Oh, no, you've gotta type it right. Two X's and an underscore, then the name, then an underscore and two more X's."

The Master flinched. "Bit artless, your brother."

Jeff scowled. *"You're* the one being 'eartless."

The Doctor giggled, but when Jeff turned the scowl toward him, he fell silent. The Master groaned as he did a search for "Xx_RainQueenKiller_xX."

"Ah, there we are. Fourteen videos for *The Tale of Amé-Ojo."*

"Just play them in order," Jeff suggested, halfway to another gulp of tea. "They're mostly short."

The Doctor got up and flicked a switch on the console. A screen lowered from somewhere up in the dark rafters of the TARDIS, and a projector popped up from the console itself. The first video on Evan's playlist started playing.

"I did always love when Teacher would bring a film," the Doctor whispered merrily. The Master shushed him.

The first video was taken vertically and first-person with a smartphone: just Evan walking along, waving the cartridge around in his hand and talking about how he hadn't believed the game really existed and had just found it by chance a few minutes ago. This was followed by one taken in what the Doctor recognized as the bedroom Jeff had been playing the game in just before.

"Right," Evan said, settling in to make eye contact with his camera. He was eighteen perhaps, hair mussed in that way that showed he'd taken quite a long time to make sure it looked like he didn't care how it looked. The resemblance was strong - some canny casting director could come along and cast the two brothers as the same character at two different ages. "So here's the cartridge. As you can see, hand-written label, doesn't look as though any other label was ripped off it beforehand." He turned the cartridge over in his hands, pointing out parts of the paper label. "Definitely faded, though, and the corners are a bit unstuck, so I'd bet this has been on it for twenty, thirty years. Ahhh..."

"What's he looking at?" the Doctor asked. Evan's

gaze had dropped to the lower portion of the screen.

"It was a live stream," Jeff responded quietly, his voice hushed as though they were in an actual movie theater. "People were sending him questions down in a little chat window."

"He said something, though." The Doctor stared at the floor, tapping a finger against his lower lip. "He said something. Or you said something. One of you. What was it?"

The video played on over him. "All right, so a lot of you are saying you want me to play it, like, right now. But I can't plug my old system into the computer to stream it, so I'm going to have to set up my camera to record my TV screen. And I don't feel like setting that up tonight." He paused and squinted at the chat feed again. "I *will* be playing it, I said, just not tonight."

"You can skip the rest of this and the next two." Jeff pointed vaguely at the screen. "It's more just answering questions about where he found the old system."

The Master flipped ahead a couple of videos, stopping when Jeff indicated a thumbnail of a TV

screen displaying a video game. "This is when he started playing. He didn't start recording until he was a little ways in. Like, past where you saw me playing."

The video started. The Doctor recognized the eerie music and sound effects playing quietly in the background, Evan's voice and button clicks drowning the game audio out slightly.

"Right, so... this is *The Tale of Amé-Ojo,* apparently. And, er, so far it's following the story that people have put up on the /nightmarefuel and /darkreality boards. I'm a knight on this sort of, like, alien planet. And I'm... fighting monsters who work for this Rain Queen character, which might be Amé-Ojo? I don't know, the translation isn't that great."

The avatar on screen came to a door, and red letters popped up on the screen. *HO? TO FORWARD, I WILL NEED KEY TO PASSAGE.*

"Ah, that's beautiful," Evan chuckled. "That's, yeah, that's quality. So I'm gonna get 'key to passage" and once I 'forward' I'll be back." The video cut awkwardly to a few minutes later, when the little knight avatar was in a low-ceilinged tunnel.

"So... so far I haven't seen anything properly creepy to speak of. The music's a bit mad, but other than that it's your typical side-scroller, innit? I'm starting to think the other posts were like, y'know, edited video of... oh."

Evan went silent as his avatar entered a cave. In front of it was a tall, blue woman with black tear tracks down her face. Though pixelated, she looked oddly realistic - certainly more than the game's era would allow for, and quite different to the art style (if one could even call it that) of the rest of the game.

"That's... all right. I think that's the Rain Queen, then. Hi there."

The Doctor sat bolt upright. "The phone call!"

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Jeff and the Master both looked at the Doctor. "The solicitor?" the Master asked, pausing the video.

"He mentioned the Rain Queen..."

"Who did?"

"The..." The Doctor looked at Jeff; the boy's eyes were wide, almost hopeful. He couldn't. Not yet. Not until he knew more.

"Ah... let's go on."

"You know something," Jeff insisted.

"I know *many* things, young man. Most of all, I know that patience is grossly underappreciated. So do find some, if you would."

Jeff closed his mouth, furrowing his brow. With a nod, the Doctor motioned for the Master to start the video again.

"So, ah." Back on the video, Evan sounded confused. "I, erm." I'm not sure what to do at this point. I mean, there's no real walkthroughs, and the only person who's documented any sort of playthrough dropped off explaining it around this point." There were a few frantic tapping sounds. "No buttons are working at all. Can't move.

HELLO, STRANGER. WHAT IS YOUR NAME?

"Oh." A few more taps. "Well, she's said hello to me, and I'm not sure how to say hello back." Evan chuckled. "Hi there! I'm Evan!"

The Rain Queen turned to face the screen.

HELLO, EVAN.

Evan swore. "Do you see this?" he hissed. "Is everyone seeing this? Look." His hand came into the frame, pointing. "Look, that's my name. That's *my*

name. And there's no... this system has no microphone. I swear, I *swear* I didn't plan this in advance, I've *never seen* this before. There's no place to type in a name in the beginning, either. She *heard* me. *How?"*

WOULD YOU LIKE TO HEAR MY STORY, EVAN?

"... yeah."

The video stopped abruptly.

"Well," the Doctor said, rising to his feet, "it's pretty clear we're not dealing with an actual video game here."

The Master gasped, clapping a hand to his chest with the faintest of metallic thuds. "How *do* you do it. Doctor?!"

The Doctor sniffed, ignoring the Master and pacing around the console. "I'm narrowing it down to approximately five digitally-evolved species."

"Digi-who?" Jeff blinked.

"Digitally-evolved species," the Master picked up. "Lifeforms who have transcended physical matter, either naturally or by scientific intervention, in order to become-"

The Doctor waved a hand impatiently, crouching in front of Jeff. "Living data."

"Well," the Master scoffed, "if you want to be bourgeois about it..."

"Now, humans like you aren't evolved enough to talk directly to this living data, so they need to talk to you via interfaces." The Doctor stood up, spreading his arms wide. "Fortunately, you live in a *whole world* of digital interfaces. So they're not spoiled for choice at all."

Jeff frowned. "But... why would they choose an old video game and not something more advanced?"

"Aha." The Doctor tapped the side of his nose with one finger. "Now, *that* is the question... Along with who they are, where they're from, what they want, why they took your brother, and how to get him back."

"So," the Master sighed, "basically everything."

The Doctor spun around. "You're more than welcome to offer *helpful* advice, too."

The Doctor and the Master both turned to look at Jeff.

"But... didn't you just say it's a digital whatsit?"

"That would be as helpful as saying the kidnapper is hum$_{ari}$ The Master looked away for a moment thoughtfully, then back * "The five closest digitally-evolved species range in population anywhere between 49 billion and 976 trillion each."

Jeffs eyes went wide.

"Indeed," the Master said in reply. "So even if we narrow it down to one species, we still haven't gotten very far."

The Doctor had begun to pace. "Tell me, did you start to notice anything odd about your brother around this time? Changes in behavior, appetite, sleeping patterns?"

Jeff thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Mm, no. He still ate and slept. And he wasn't gaming any less. But..."

"But?"

"Well, usually he's alternating between three or four games. He plays a few: *Gates of Seven Hells*, *Beasts and Bosses Online, Giant Robot Tactics...* he never plays just one game all the way through or he gets burnt out."

"So..." The Doctor drummed his fingers on the

console. "You're saying he switched *entirely* to this one and didn't touch the others?"

Jeff nodded. "Yeah. He was playing for pretty much the same amount of time each day, but he didn't swap out any. So it didn't seem weird to Mum, but it seemed weird to *me.*"

"Granted," the Doctor mused, "this is the same mother who threw you an elaborate birthday party without seeming terribly bothered that one of her sons has disappeared. If you hadn't told me, I'd never have known from her behavior."

At this, Jeff looked away. ^He... they... there was a fight. A week ago."

"Before or after the game came around?"

"Before. They fought about curfew and he'd talked about running off to live with his mates, and she said fine, why doesn't he just." Jeff kicked his feet awkwardly. "I tried to tell her that's not what's going on, that if he'd run off then he would've at least packed something, but she thinks I'm covering for him."

"Which means she wouldn't have..."

The Doctor trailed off, suddenly noticing a

mumbling from just over his shoulder. He turned around to see that the video had started up again. "Wait a minute!" he snapped, whipping his head back around to the Master.

"Division of labor," the Master said smoothly, smiling in a way that seemed to indicate that he was somehow about to turn the video into a genocide machine. "While you two were chattering away, I watched another two of his video entries."

"And?"

The Master paused the video. *"And* he didn't talk through the first one at all. Not unless he was spoken to. It was pure gameplay. But a great deal of talking from the game itself."

"Yeah," Jeff confirmed, "usually he babbles a lot when he's making a video like that. But for these, he was really quiet most of the time. Usually I'd sit in on his recordings, but these were boring because he never, you know, made any jokes or talked back like he usually does. So I left him alone."

'This bit in particular was fascinating." The Master clicked a button on the console and ran the current video back a minute or two. The camera was

still focused on the TV screen, as ever, but it was as Jeff had said: there was no incessant chatter from Evan. The occasional button click, the music from the game, blips when his character would jump or move about.

Also strange was the fact that there were no enemies on the screen. Nothing to fight. Come to that, not even any friendly characters to talk to. It was simply Evan's avatar walking forward. Walking. Walking. Walking. The pixelated background behind him would change rapidly, indicating day and night, changing seasons, the slow decay of his surroundings. But the little character walked ever onward in silence.

"Is the entire video like that?" the Doctor asked.

Jeff was the one to answer. "Yeah. After a while I'd come into check on him and... this would be the game. Just walking forward while time passes around him." He tilted his head thoughtfully. "I think this is the video where-"

The avatar onscreen stopped, its progress blocked by the reappearance of the Rain Queen. There was a small gasp from Evan, followed by

words onscreen.

NOW YOU HAVE HEARD MY STORY, EVAN. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?

"I... yeah. Yeah, I think I do." Evan's voice sounded weak, verged on by unshed tears.

"But she didn't say anything," the Doctor protested. "There were no words, no-"

The Master smirked. "Precisely." He gave the Doctor a knowing look.

"What... why are you giving me that..." The Doctor fell silent for a moment. "Oh. Ohi Oh, I *see!* Of course!""What?" Jeff yelped. "What do you see?"

But the Master carried on. "But you know what that means, don't you?"

"Yes, unfortunately." The Doctor snorted out a laugh. "The sinkholes of terror, eh?" He grabbed the cartridge and began unwrapping it. "Jeff, could you go and get the whatsit off your brother's television? The game thing. Bring all the cables."

Jeff got up, ready to do as he was told without thinking, but stopped himself. "What? Why?"

"Because..." The Doctor waved the cartridge. "I'm going to get your brother back."

"What we're dealing with," the Master explained as the Doctor began rigging the game system up to the TARDIS console,

"is one of the Veglia."

"Is that one of those digi-things?"

"Digitally-evolved-"

"Living data," the Doctor cut in. "Yes, Jeff. The Veglia are living data. But of all the current species of living data, they are the only ones so highly trained that all they need to communicate with lower life forms is permission."

Jeff squinted. "Like... vampires?"

"What?"

"You know, like how vampires can come into your house if you invite them in. So these Veglias can come into your brain if you [in]vite them in."

The Doctor gave a non-committal shrug. "Close enough.They don't actually go into your brain, no. But they can set up a neural relay once you've given them permission."

"That'd be why he wasn't talking all that time," Jeff mused.

"The Veglia are also a very long-lived race," the

Master picked up. "Well-nigh immortal. The story of one member of their species could take centuries to tell."

"In other words," the Doctor finished, plugging in one last cord, "what you were seeing while your brother played that game was whatever is in here telling him its life story telepathically over the course of hundreds and hundreds of years, compressed into the course of a few gaming sessions. Which would explain why he was so wrung out."

"But why?"

"Ah." The Doctor smiled wearily. "You see, that's where I come in." He picked up a game controller and waved it.

Jeff jumped up. "No!"

"Oh, stop everything," the Master said blandly, "the boy said 'No.'"

"Shut up!" Jeff snapped at the Master, whose eyes widened in what almost looked like amusement. Then, to the Doctor, "I'm the one who's going to save him! He's *my* brother. You have nothing to do with this. You shouldn't-"

"Tut." The Doctor rapped Jeff lightly on the head. "I have everything do to with this. Who figured out what kidnapped your brother? Who figured out what it was doing?"

The Master took Jeffs vacated seat, crossing his arms behind his head. He almost seemed to be enjoying himself. "And didn't you say it addressed you specifically? Time Lord?"

"There's that, too." The Doctor turned the controller over in his hands. "I suspect there's something it wants that it thinks it can get from me." Then he fixed Jeff with a critical look. "Besides, didn't you say you couldn't beat the Chief King of the Blokeyface?"

Jeff scowled, folding his arms. "Like you'll do any better."

"I'll have you know I competed regularly in the Academy's e-sports tournaments." The Doctor gestured to the Master. "The two of us came in third in the *Cerulean Nightmare* speed-run."

"Third of three," the Master grumbled.

"Now," the Doctor went on with a grand exhale, "which button makes the little blighter jump?"

Jeff groaned. "You're going to mess it all up!"

"He has a point," the Master chimed in. "Have you forgotten that, from what you told me, the lifeform inside the game threatened both you and the child? This won't end well."

The Doctor put down the controller to shuffle off his jacket, then resumed gaming stance. "I insulted it. Of course it got threatening. It was protecting itself. But I think you'll find it's more interested in its end goal than in killing anyone. Because if it's telling its story... it wants something."

Jeff lowered his eyes. The Master leaned on the back of the Doctor's chair, watching with interest. The Doctor booted up the game, going directly to Jeffs save file. The screen loaded with a series of uncomfortable pixelated glitches and noises that, in a newer machine, would signify it was about to crash or possibly catch fire. But eventually, the familiar sight of the beast the Doctor Tirsi encountered appeared on tne screen, still in his crystalline cave, still facing the tiny avatar.

"Right." The Doctor jabbed a button. "So how do you make the little whozit move?"

Another groan from Jeff. "Give me that."

The Doctor swiped the controller out of Jeffs reach with a petulant frown. "No. You said you couldn't beat it. My turn."

"I think perhaps it's *my* turn," the Master cut in, waving a hand. The Doctor squinted, sneered, and finally handed the controller up to the Master.

"Weaknesses?" he asked Jeff.

"You've gotta wait until a stalactite falls and hits him. Then he starts flashing red and white and you can hit him. Any other time, you take damage if you try."

The battle was over in a matter of moments, and the monster exploded into a gory mess. The right-hand wall of the cave collapsed, providing an exit. With a smirk, the Master handed the controller back down to the Doctor.

"Showoff," the Doctor muttered, but silenced himself when red words appeared on the screen.

THE KNIGHT IS NO LONGER THE KNIGHT.

The Doctor and the Master both looked at Jeff.

"Th-This never happened in Evan's videos," Jeff stammered.

THE GAME HAS CHANGED.

And, with a shaking effect and an 8-bit explosion, the monitor was filled by the face of the Rain Queen.

This close, even in pixels, the face was ludicrously detailed - almost photo-realistic. She was a fair, fragile-looking woman, with blacked-out eyes and narrow features. The two black tear-tracks still descended from her eyes, but now they almost seemed to be flowing. As though whatever blackness had replaced her eyes was escaping. Strange, ethereal music played. If it hadn't been electronic, it might almost have been beautiful; as it was, it was haunting, unsettling.

I HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR SOMEONE LIKE YOU. The words appeared on the screen in the top left corner, superimposed over the Rain Queen's face. But this time the text was white, in a decorative, almost fairy tale font. Gentle blips accompanied the letters as they popped up, as though the sound effects were attempting to mimic a woman's voice.

"Oh." The Doctor cracked an awkward smile.

"Well, this is all very sudden. Shouldn't we at least have dinner first?"

FOR DECADES, I HAVE SEARCHED FOR SOMEONE WHO COULD TRULY UNDERSTAND MY STORY. ARE YOU HE... TIME LORD?

"Bit nicer than before," the Doctor muttered. Then, louder: "Yes. I believe I might just be, erm, he."

WILL YOU COME TO ME, TIME LORD?

The Doctor stretched his arms out. "Take me away, baby."

What Jeff saw next, he would struggle to describe for the rest of his life. On the screen, the Rain Queen opened her mouth, as if inhaling. A white beam of light extended from the monitor, hitting the Doctor and... lowering his resolution? Bit by bit, the frozen figure of the Doctor became more and more pixelated, until he was simply one dark dot...

... that disappeared into the screen.

The Master buried his face in one gloved hand. "Well, that was potentially quite foolish."

"He's gone!" Jeff shouted. "He's gone, just like Evan!"

"Unfortunately, I rather suspect he will be back quite soon. On the bright side, knowing him, he'll have your brother in tow."

Jeff looked up at the Master with large, pleading eyes. "Don't say that. Don't... don't let me believe it. Don't let me have hope. Because if it doesn't work... if the Doctor's gone forever, too..."

The Master laughed ruefully. "Ah, dear boy. One thing you must learn about the Doctor eventually: 'hope' is what he *does.* No..." A sniff. A sneer. "Hope is what he *is."*

Jeff turned his eyes to the monitor. It had gone black.

The Doctor shuddered, letting out a blubbering sound. "Blbrbrbrbr. Well, that was bracing." He ran his hands over his hair, then looked at the backs of his hands. Everything *looked* normal. He tapped "Shave and a Haircut" on his cheeks. Everything was normal. He stomped his foot on the ground beneath him. An odd, synthesized sound met his ears.

"Huh."

Satisfied that he was intact, he had a better look around himself. He was alone in a large, well-

appointed sitting room with what appeared to be marble walls. It looked real enough, but something- the perfection of each curve and angle, perhaps, or the fact that the patterning of the marble seemed to repeat - tipped him off that it was all digital.

Also of note? No doors, and no windows.

"I know the invite said bring a dish," he said, raising his voice to whomever might be in hiding, "but I couldn't be bothered.

D'you have a tip jar?"

A humanoid shape stepped out of the marble wall to his left, marble-patterned itself. As it approached him, the marble patterning melted away, revealing a tall, blue-skinned woman in an oversized dress of grey sackcloth. White ringlets tumbled over her shoulders. And her eyes... They weren't black, but rather empty: the blackness was filled with multi-colored pixels blinking in and out of existence. She had no eyes - he was seeing inside her through her eye sockets. And the "tears," upon closer examination, were streams of data leaking out.

It didn't take long for the Doctor to piece it

together.

"You're a prisoner."

The Rain Queen smiled sadly.

"I would think data-beings would be above physical punishment." He motioned to her empty eye sockets.

"Data-beings, yes. But when judged by matter-men, no." The Rain Queen's voice sounded almost auto-tuned. "It rests easier on their conscience. Writing out two lines of code seems so much more humane than plucking someone's eyes out by hand, does it not?"

The Doctor inhaled sharply, wincing. "Not by my standards."

"Then you are one of the special ones, Time Lord."

"So I've been told." He met her empty eyes. "'Rain Queen' isn't your name, is it?"

"No.""Amé-Ojo, then?"

She shook her head. "I am Princess AM3-0J of the Veglian Rain Quadrant."

"Ah." The Doctor made a quick bow. "Your Highness."

Her smile was tired, serene. Kind.

"Right. Good." The Doctor clapped and rubbed his hands together, darting to an overstuffed chair and plunking himself down in it. "Now that the niceties are out of the way, how about we talk about this whole mass-kidnapping thing?"

"Mass... kidnapping? I am afraid I do not understand, Time Lord."

The Doctor propped his feet on an ottoman with a synthesized squish. "Kidnapping. Stealing people away against their will. Mass. Wodges of them at once. Reason... why?"

The Rain Queen... the Princess, rather... shook her head, smiling as though speaking to a slow child. "I have taken no one away against their will. Everyone who has come to me has agreed willingly."

"Oh, right. Yes. The whole mental data transfer thing. See, we actually had a look at one of those 'willing' people. And... see, this is where it gets tough, cultural differences and all that... what you're doing is *technically* referred to as 'brainwashing' and it's frowned upon."

"I do not understand."

"Well, see." The Doctor tapped his temples. "You and me - Veglian, Time Lord - we've got nice big brains that can handle things like that. That's why you and I are talking now and I'm not dribbling in a corner. Humans, though? The amount of information you're feeding into them can actually override their common sense. You're effectively hijacking them."

"It is a simple information transfer. It is not my fault that matter-men are not equipped to handle the influx of data I send them."

The Doctor wrinkled his nose. "Sort of is, though."

'They hear my story. They are convinced. They accept."

"Mm. About that. I never got the story. Just sort of jumped ahead." He leaned forward eagerly. "What say we beam it over quick?"

"As you wish." The Princess raised her head. Two beams of rainbow light shot from her eye sockets, forming into one stream and smacking the Doctor between the eyes. He fell back in his chair, squinting and rubbing his forehead.

"Quick enough?" Her tone seemed almost mocking.

The Doctor chuckled. "Fair play. Give me a minute to unpack this." He closed his eyes, exhaling slowly.

A princess captured in battle on an ice planet. Shamed by matter-men. Blinded and imprisoned for alleged war crimes, her tiny prison transported to a backwater planet. Communication with one matter-man who was poking at her prison-chip, who installed it in a game cartridge before disappearing. Telling her story for thirty years now, pleading, waiting for someone who can break open her prison.

"A sad story." The Doctor rubbed his forehead again with the back of his hand. "A shame, Your Highness. I'm so sorry. But..." And here he looked around, confirming they were alone in the spacious room. "I have it on good authority that you have one other person in here with you. But I don't see him."

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"I do not."

"Well, I know a young man who might argue-"

"I have twenty-six."

The Doctor spluttered. "Wh... Well. That's me set right, then. Where are they?"

The Princess gestured languidly. "Stored away. When I am released, so will they be."

"Wait..." The Doctor cocked his head. "You've been manipulating these people to come to you... as *hostages?"*

"When I am released," the Princess stated again, "So will they be."

"Sorry, but I'm starting to wonder about these 'war crimes' they imprisoned you for."

The Princess shrugged. "I was a diplomat. I employed diplomacy. Nothing more."

"The same 'diplomacy' you've been using from in here, by any chance?"

She didn't answer.

"I think," the Doctor said slowly, his voice taking on a sharp edge, "I'm starting to see why they chucked you out here."

"If the enemy soldiers chose to dispose of themselves after hearing what I had to say, that is their choice."

"'Dispose of themselves.' Very fancy words for

suicide, I'm guessing. Am I right?"

A placid smile. But that placidity seemed almost threatening now.

"Right. So. The story you're *not* telling." The Doctor sprang to his feet. "Data-being brainwashes hundreds? Thousands? Of soldiers into offing themselves in battle. Wins battle. Loses war, though, because otherwise you wouldn't have gotten *caught.*

Wants out, so tries to earn sympathy by brainwashing *more* people. Are you seeing yet why I'm disinclined to be on your side right now?"

"Needs must in battle. Time Lord."

The Doctor frowned. "Nah. Needs *never* must."

"You speak very easily." The Princess closed her dark, empty eyes. "But I wonder... what decision would you make in the heat of battle? Would you still stand so firmly by your beliefs if you, too, were a warrior?"

The Doctor scowled. "Release the boy's brother. I can't speak for the others, but Evan's just a child. This is too much for him."

"I cannot."

"Cannot, or *will* not?"

The Princess's features were impassive. "I cannot release one without releasing them all. Opening a matter-transference stream will reconvert *all* matter to its original state and eject them from my cell."

"Fine," the Doctor shot back with a wave, "then release them all."

"No. Not until I am released."

"Then we're going to have a long sit-in, aren't we?"

The Princess remained impassive. The Doctor stared, shrugged, then shuffled around in a waistcoat pocket. "Aha! Well, this is still intact."

"What?"

The Doctor withdrew a small pitch pipe and blew an A. "Well, since I'm going to be here a while, I thought I'd fill you in on what you've missed while you've been holed up here. Art, science..." He brightened. "Musical theatre!"

The Princess tilted her head curiously.

"Right, stop me if you've heard this one." He began tapping a rhythm on the arm of his chair. "How does a bas-"

"How long's it been?" Jeff asked, curling up in the

armchair.

"Three hours, forty-seven minutes, and... nineteen, twenty seconds." The Master didn't look up from his book.

"Mum's going to be worried." But it was obvious the worry was largely internal. "What's he doing in there?"

The Master let out a long-suffering hiss. "Could be anything, dear boy. Pleas to their humanity, raging endlessly about witnessing dying stars..."

The game console shuddered, cracked, and burst open, and the Doctor's voice rang forth from it. "Noooooooo-"

There was a bang, a flash of light, and suddenly the floor was littered with two dozen confused, winded people.

"...othing's gonna stop us, let the bad times roll! We-" The Doctor stopped mid-note, looking around. "Oh. Oh. Boo!" He glared at the console. "You could've at least lasted through the finale!"

The Master pinched the bridge of his nose. "Is that your answer to everything now. Doctor? Show tunes?"

The Doctor picked himself up, brushing himself off. "You watch. Someday that's going to save the world."

"Tssh."

Jeff sprang from his chair, diving through the bewildered crowd. Evan was lying on the TARDIS floor, seemingly unconscious. "Evan? *Evan!* Evan, wake up!"

"Matter-transference stream," the Doctor explain to the room, though no one was listening. "Release one, you release them all. I was hoping to win her over, then propose a hostage release..." He shrugged, almost disappointed. "I suppose this works,

"The Rain Queen..." Evan's voice was raspy, strained. He looked up at Jeff blearily. "Y-You're not in here, too, are you?"

Jeff shook his head, sniffing back tears. "He got you out! The Doctor got you out! You're home!"

"Yes, well..." The Master cast an eye around the room. "That's all very sweet, but we have thirty years' worth of presumed-dead people to spring on terrified families."

Evan was still getting to his feet. "What... are you

sure I'm out?" He stared suspiciously at the TARDIS's central column. Jeff just laughed, drying his eyes with a sleeve as he escorted his brother into the back garden.

"Thanks, Doctor," Jeff threw back over his shoulder. "Thanks for fixing my birthday for me."

The Doctor gave a tight smile and a wave through the crowd, The TARDIS doors closed with an almost weary creak. "And that's the last of them." The Doctor turned the tiny chip over and over in his hands. "Funny that they aged even after the data conversion... Too weak for pure conversion, I suppose. But it keeps the timeline tidy, I suppose."

"You and your precious web of time," the Master muttered.

"The question now... what do we do with *her?"*

The Master raised an eyebrow. "She's quite powerful."

"Precisely." The Doctor looked at the broken game casing. "Fortunately, she won't be haunting any more gamers anytime soon."

"I know what *I'd* do."

"Yes," the Doctor said sharply, "so do I. That's not

what I asked."

"Ah. What would the Doctor do." The Master's smile was knowing, almost bitter.

The Doctor placed the chip on the console, cushioning it on a handkerchief. "She's a piece of work. But she might as well be judged by her own people. It's only fair."

"Is it just?"

"I think so." The Doctor directed his eyes down to the console; sinking himself into punching in coordinates. "She fought for her people. But she used unscrupulous methods. That falls to them to

"Not the sort of thing *you'd* ever do."

The Doctor shrugged. "Another time. Another place. The right circumstances. Who knows?" He frowned, the Princess's words coming back to him.

Would you still stand so firmly by your beliefs if you, too, were a warrior?

"I sometimes wonder."

"If you're going to get all broody and philosophical, I'm going to my room."

"No fear." The Doctor threw on a smile. "Just the passing thought of a moment." He threw a lever.

"Full steam ahead for Veglia... and then..."

The Master crossed his arm. "Another sinkhole of terror?"

"Yeah. If we're lucky."

BREAKING THE FOURTH

RACHEL REDHEAD

The TARDIS rattled through the infinite majesty of time and space. The time machine was nearly middle-aged now, but she kept up with her spry young passengers by renewing herself regularly and hiring a team of cleaning droids in secret to clean up any annoying messages.

The Doctor was the fastidious captain of the ship. There was no responsibility he didn't try to avoid at some point. Yet he carried the weight of the shoulders on his ISFP shoulders. He liked nothing better than a warm evening spent in somewhere popular drinking red wine and dropping names like

ton weights into the conversation.

Alison Cheney was something of a seasoned traveller now. She and the Doctor had been across the universe and back again. More often than not the fly in the ointment, the sarcastic and nefarious Master, stayed in his suite of rooms. Alas today was notone of those days.

The TARDIS control room was a baroque affair of wooden furniture and brass pipes. It was Pink Floyd's Relics album having an affair with a Jules Verne novel. The Doctor was always adjusting things. A dial one day became a switch the next. Last week the door handles had been replaced by rotating magnets.

"Where are we now, old girl?" The Doctor asked dryly, to cover up his genuine love for the beloved type 40. "Hmmm? Some dreary old backwater dive on Sontar again? Perhaps a winter palace on Androzani Major?"

"Perhaps we've gone on holiday by mistake." The Master said, with a perfectly timed put-down.

Alison sighed. "Honestly, you two are worse than children some times."

The Doctor's head jerked around to look at Alison. "Some more than others."

The Master merely smiled and dunked his biscuit into his cup o tea. "Ignore him, my dear. He's in one of his moods again."He doesn't even need to eat." The Doctor complained, looking at Alison as if she were the referee in the spat. Then he did look at the Master once more. "You're a robot, not a biological life form. You get all the sustenance you need from the TARDIS."

Alison sighed. "I think next time I'll just stay in my room and listen to my MP3's. This is worse than when my parents got divorced."

The Master dabbed at the corner of his mouth with a napkin and looked up from his comfy chair at the Doctor. "I know perfectly well what I am, my dear Doctor, but I don't want to forget who I am. I may be your best friend, but that doesn't mean you have any right to tell me who to be."

The Doctor turned to Alison. "Its times like this I'm glad I can switch him off." He took the control device out of his pocket, but Alison grabbed it off of him. "What are you doing? Alison?" Alison pocketed

the control device. "The Master is your friend, or so you keep telling me. Personally I don't care much right now if you have at each other with swords again. Either way he's not some sort of DVD player. You have no right to turn him on and off just because you can't stand to lose an argument."

"Well said." The Master replied. "I do believe there's hope for you yet my dear girl."

Alison rolled her eyes. "Stop calling me that. My name is Alison. Not dear, love, girl or any other misogynist term you wish to patronize me with. If either of you want me I'll be in the rock pool, looking at the waterfall." She turned and left, before either of the two men could react.

The Doctor turned around to look sharply at oldest friend. "Now look what you've done."

The Master rose to his feet. "Me? I rather think it was both of us. Our little verbal jousting has taken a rather heavy toll on Alison. While we enjoy our little set-to's I fear that Miss Cheney's sensibilities have become rather...rather..." Having forgotten completely what he was supposed to say the Master threw his hands in the air and in an exasperated

voice he called out "line?"Just him the copy of the script. "Your hairstylist has finally stopped sobbing now, and will do your hair again."

"Oh very well." Sir Derek Jacobi replied to Sid the technician "How's the baby by the way? Is she still keeping you and your wife up on a night?"

"Yeah, she's still not sleeping properly. My Mum said to give her some whisky in her milk on a night, but I don't want to give my baby alcohol."

"Try a little rum, half a teaspoon in her milk should be enough, Whisky has a much sharper taste. It could unsettle her." Sir Derek looked over to the door that led to the make-up section.

The director approached the star of the show. "You were wonderful Richard, darling. But can you be more, I don't know, more arrogant? More dominating? You're supposed to be the Doctor, not some sad reject from that failed Apocalypse Raithaduine revival. Did you re-watch all those old episodes of Pertwee I sent you?"

"Is that what that parcel was?" Richard asked, letting go the fact the director had started a sentence with the word 'buf. "No, I haven't looked at them

yet, sorry."

"I don't know why I bother sometimes, I really don't. Why don't you take that coat back to wardrobe while we reset the scene? Tell them to have another go at getting it to fit right. It looks baggier than yesterday and it should be green. Oh, there's Sophie." The director had spotted his leading lady and rushed over to where she was standing. "Sophie, you need to be more animated love. It was like watching paint dry. You should be more relaxed, funkier, more spirited, you know...livelier. In fact, larger than life. Can't you do something with your arms? A couple of street-cred hand gestures maybe?"

"I know which gesture I want to give you mate." Sophie was sick of all the idiot directors, pretending they were something when all they had were a couple of episodes of the Bill and a Channel 5 comedy. "You're not Guy Ritchie you kmow; now he's totally shaggable. You're more like Shaun Ritchie and me Mum fancies him!"

"I'm still the director, love, so be a dear and have a word with your agent and get him to remind you

of the terms of your contract, hmmm?"

* * *

Sir Derek wandered into the make-up room. "Are you feeling better now...Kylie is it?"

"Kirsty." Kirsty McManus mumbled nervously, fresh tears threatening to join the dried up ones still caked in her eyelashes. "Kylie's in wardrobe."

"Well both are trendy young people's names. I think that dear boy Richard mentioned a Kylie once, maybe it's the one you mentioned? At my age all your modern sounding names just all start to sound the same I'm afraid." He paused for breath. "Now, you've seen the continuity Polaroid's, can we try to get something similar to them? Don't try to be creative, just cut the hair according to the snaps and I won't get another earful from our gloriously fascist director. And more importantly to you; you'll get to keep your job."

"I'll do my best Sir Derek." Kirsty sniffled and picked up the hairbrush, comb and scissors.

"No, you'll do better than last time. If that was

your best I fail to see how they even approached you for this job. In my time I've worked with professional hair stylists. They take a pride in their work you know. They strive to archive perfection with comb and scissor. They don't just hack at it like a six-year-old who's borrowed mummy's pinking shears."

"You're just being a nasty, rotten, old man!" Kirsty lunged at the aging actor. Holding the scissors like a weapon, as she tried to stab him for being so mean and nasty to her.

I'll take those." The man in the smoking jacket said. "Free at last."

Richard wandered along the corridor until he found the wardrobe room. He didn't bother to knock and just walked inside. "Anyone here?" He asked, hoping for some sort of reply.

The Wardrobe assistant appeared, as if by magic. She was wearing a long dark coat and answered to Kylie, though her real name was Kathy. "Oooh, it's you Mr. Grant. I'm a big fan of yours you know. I've got all your films on DVD. I was saying to my husband only last night in bed that I hope you come

to me for a fitting."

Richard didn't know what to say so he went straight to business. "Apparently this coat isn't right. The director, strange angry psychopath that he is, kept mumbling about continuity."

Kylie picked up the big book of continuity photographs. "Hmmm, yes, it does look wrong doesn't it? Let's measure you up for the green material and I'll have a go at it. Do you want anything from the canteen sent up?"

"I'd love a hazelnut cappuccino." Richard confessed. "I can't stand tea. If it wasn't part of the character's integral persona I'd have it written in my contract that I do not drink tea." He checked the time on both his watches, one which told UK time and the other the time in Swaziland, the country of his birth.

"My younger sister's a fan of the show you know. Lord knows why, she refuses to watch proper programs and she hates reality TV. She even made me make a scarf for her like Tom Baker's." "Erm, yes." Richard paced around. "Does she want an autograph?"

"Probably, but I'm not going to impose. If I asked all the actors I work with for autographs, I'd never get anything done and I'd get the sack."

"Just this once." Richard picked up a pen from the desk, won't tell anyone, I promise. What's her name?"

"Alice." Kylie replied.

"How charming." Richard lied. "To Alice, many happy adventures through the looking glass, lots of love Richard E Grant." "She'll be ever so grateful Mr. Grant." Kylie put the autograph in her coat pocket. "Now if you can lose the coat I can get your measurements taken. Did you know I wanted Bill Nighy as the Doctor? He's a real gentleman, not a flouncing primadonna like you." Kylie picked up her tape measure and tried to garrotte her victim with it...

* * *

Sophie went back to her dressing room, where she found her agent already waiting for her. "Any news about the signing next month?"

Oliver Toyz nodded. "Yeah, they'll pay £1000 for the full day."

"Not bad, but I want the fans through as quickly as possible. I don't want another Middlesbrough."

"Good heavens no, they'll have a member of staff assigned to you at all times." Oliver made a note in his schedule. "Now what about Loaded? They want you to do a cover shoot.They promise it'll be discreet and classy."

"I don't think so." Sophie replied. "I'm on Blue Peter again next week. Wait until next year and see how contract negotiations go. If I'm doing another year of this then schedule a shoot for after the contracts are signed."

"Of course." Oliver replied. "Now what about those advertising campaigns?"

"I'll do radio but no telly work, there's nothing sadder than celebrities forced to do telly commercials."

"Just one more thing Sophie."

"There always is with you."

"How do you feel about a new celebrity game show? They take a different team of celebrities each

week and put them through various silly games and events. It's all for charity and the public have a good time watching you all make fools of yourself. They're offering a five figure payment for a weekend's work."

"Tell them *I'll* think about it." Sophie replied. "Now what about next week's script? I still haven't gotten it yet. How can I learn my lines if the writer wants to devote extra time to making it a masterpiece?"

Oliver nodded quickly. "I'll get onto the producer for you; get him to put pressure on things."

"Fine." Sophie sighed. "Now what about you and Wendy? When's the baby due? I saw her last week and she was glowing."

* * *

Malcolm looked at Sir Derek's hair. "You have lovely hair."

Sir Derek looked at the dear young boy. "Are you sure that mad woman's gone?"

"Oh yes. I saw the police taking her away. I must

say they looked ever so cute in their smart uniforms."

"Yes, well if we can get back to the hair?"

"Of course. Now do you use a conditioner?"

"I think so." Sir Derek replied. 'They use that much these days, it's hard to remember, but it usually feels nice and soft. It usually has the aroma of damson jam."

"Good, because it makes it look that little bit better and it doesn't wither so much under those dreadfully hot studio lights. I just die sometimes when I see bad grooming on the telly. I said as much to Floyd last night in bed."

"I think it just needs a slight trim."

"Just relax and let me work my magic Sir Derek. I must say you're the first Sir I've ever had."

"Pardon?" Sir Derek felt himself slipping back into character for some reason.

"I normally do the extras, they just need a basic touch up, but you're the first person with a title. Do you normally have a parting? Because we could push this back and it'd really show off your eyes."

"I think they need you to follow the continuity

photos." Master/Jacobi replied coolly.

"Oh, well I can do that. Hmmm, yes, very sloppy work this love. I'm sure I can work down to that level if I try."

"I'm sure you'll manage somehow." The Master idly took the TCE out of his pocket. "I've been on at them to remake this all year. It's so inappropriate for a kiddies TV show." He aimed it at the annoying human and fired, only to discover that it was a fake. "Hmmm, how curious."

* * *

Richard dragged the unconscious body of the wardrobe assistant behind the wooden divider. Where once it was used to preserve modesty now it was used to conceal the results of his necessary and unavoidable handiwork. Then he jumped as the door opened and the tea lady pushed her tea and snack-laden trolley into the room with a clattering clunk.

"Here's your tea Mr. Grant." The tea lady held out the cup and saucer for the famous actor.

"There must be some mistake. I expressly asked for a hazelnut cappuccino."

The tea lady frowned. "Tea's all I've got, luv."

"Oh very well, but put six sugars in it to take away the taste." Doctor/Richard smelled the tea as he raised it to his lips and discovered that it wasn't tea at all. It was really sulphuric acid, and he flung the contents at the tea lady's face. "What's going on? Why were my memories affected? Who are you?" He shook the tea lady but recoiled as her face melted away leaving behind a sardonic skull of metal. She flung him against the far wall with ease, before picking up some large pinking shears from the desk. She stood over him and then she brought them down into the left side of his chest, stabbing him though one of his hearts...

* * *

Malcolm picked up the straight razor and gently tried to slice through the Master's throat with it. He didn't get very farhowever, when the Master grabbed his wrist and broke it easily making him

yelp in pain. "What the hell did you do that for?» Malcolm looked down to see the blade in his hand before it slipped out of uncontrollable fingers down onto the floor. "What's going on here?"

"Haaiii!" The Master used a simple Venusian karate chop on the young man to send him sprawling on the floor. He'd had the same move and many similar ones applied to him by the Doctor earlier in their friendship. Back then they were both young and keen to make their mark on the universe. Then, as the young man rose again with blade in hand, he exited (stage left) with his head held high. "A morale victory is better than nothing." He smiled, mainly to himself. "This place is like a labyrinth." He looked up and down unfamiliar corridors. "I could never feel at home here. Far too grey and lifeless. Give me deep shadows and Gothic architecture every time."

* * *

Sophie looked at the pile of fan mail. "Oh for the day I can afford to hire someone to do this for me." She

picked up the first envelope from the pile and looked at it.

"I'm trying to get you a pay rise." Oliver put on his best smarmy voice.

"Try harder." Sophie opened the first letter. "Pass me that pen." It was a request for an autograph. Quickly she signed one of her stock of publicity shots and stuffed it in an envelope, with the original letter so that it could be addressed properly once the rest of the mail had been looked through.

Oliver looked at his notepad. "Your friend Janine rang again, she wants to know if you're still on for lunch tomorrow night." 'Tomorrow?" Sophie was wary. Janine was the worst gossip ever and all she wanted was to ride on her fame anyway, by going to some fancy restaurant that she could never get into. If she didn't get her cheap car insurance she'd have ditched the pest years ago. "Do I have anything else on?""No, you're totally free." schedule.

"Two hours of her extolling the joys of motherhood and how every woman should have a child. If I could only get a cheaper quote somewhere else. I'd rather be at a party somewhere. I'll send her

flowers and reschedule for next month. Do not get her talking about the baby."

"There's plenty of parties to choose from at this time of year. Did you have anything particular in mind?"

"Nothing glitzy and nothing with a good cause." She pointed to her forehead. "I've had it up to here with feeling good about helping others. See if you can get me into a film premiere? In fact, get a few more in for the rest of the week. I want to give Pie News something so they can talk about me. Maybe I should have an affair with someone?"

"You could get a part in a movie, there's the new Hannah Sinclair flick. They apparently want a limber black actress for the audience touchstone role."

"Whatever, I don't care; they're all the same anyway. Why can't I play something edgy and different? Do you think I could play Winnie Mandela? I think I could play Winnie Mandela."

* * *

The Doctor felt the movement before he saw it. Deftly he dodged the clumsy strike by the recovered wardrobe assistant. "Why are you doing this?"

"Obedience to the Master."

The Doctor rolled his eyes. "I might have known. I can't take him anywhere."

"Not your Master, my Master. I obey my creator." The Wardrobe assistant tried to attack the Doctor again but she got tangled up in her own strings and she fell lifelessly to the floor.

The Doctor carefully approached the young woman but she remained still. Fearful now for her life he grew closer and turned her over to look at her face to check for breathing. He

inninvoluntary recoiled as her 'face' fell off to reveal a blank visage like an unpainted marionette. "So, you're not real? How curious. I must mention this to Alison at once. Oh what a stu!* Doctor I've been. It's like that time Genghis lost that archery contest on his final arrow." He stood up sharply. "If this is a plan of some kind then we've not only walked into it but we've also swallowed the cheese." He left the room quickly.

* * *

"This place makes no sense." The Master paused for a second as he explored the latest corridor. "Either I'm walking in circles or these corridors are shifting about by some strange unseen volition." He continued down the grey-floored passageway until he came to a junction. There were two choices both equally promising and equally lacking in promise. The left had a red stripe running along the left edge of the floor while the right had a white stripe along its right edge. "The road less travelled?" He looked left and then chose right. "There's a perfectly good reason why it's less travelled." Luckily for him the demon spider on the other road went without supper again.

* * *

Sophie walked down the green corridor to the women's make up room. It wasn't anything serious just a quick touch up of her game face as she liked to call it. Normally she was quite able to see to her own

vanity but the BBC discouraged its actors as they didn't want to risk another strike.

* * *

The Master spotted something familiar up ahead. "The TARDIS?" He tried to open it but it was locked. He withdrew his key from his pocket but the lock was a fake. "How odd." He stroked his black and grey striped beard for a few seconds as he thought about what to do next. Then, with a blur of action, his hand simply rammed its way through the cheap wooden door. He withdrew his hand and peered inside, only to see that it was quite empty. "How very odd." He stood still as a Holmesian double act of put-upon set handlers walked past, ignoring him completely. "It's like I'm not even here, how annoying. At least they didn't play that annoying musical motif; I never liked that at all."

Sophie sat in the chair and relaxed. "Hi Pauline. I just need my slap fixing in case mien Fuhrer is in a mood again."

Pauline put a couple of tissues over the costume

to make sure nothing got onto it and ruined it, if that happened then Miss Carlington would have her arse in a sling and she was already on a warning after the eyeliner incident last month. "Sure thing Sophie."

"How's the stomach today?" Sophie asked. "Did you try the meditation and whale song CD?"

"The pain's not so bad today. I go in next week for the operation. That CD helped a bit but I'm still not looking forward to going under the knife. Working helps keep my mind off it, plus I get more time off afterwards. One of the few benefits of being union these days."

"Still, it can't be easy. Is Carl still working away?"

"Yeah, but he sends me the money regular each week. You just have to keep going, don't you? I know I sound like a cliché but what else can you do?"

"Nothing." Sophie agreed. "Just say your lines and go through the motions. It's all anyone can ask of you, especially in this business."

* * *

"S*ir Derek."* Chad ran up to the ageing star. "Sir Derek. I've got a message. I looked all over for you. There's an old friend yours in the bar who wants to have a word with you."

"Is there now?" The Master was perplexed. "Tell me; won't I get into the most terrible trouble if I'm late?"

"Oh no, the director says you can take all the time you want."

"Did he now?" The Master replied. "Very well I shall go and meet my old acquaintance. It's terribly impolite to keep a dear friend waiting, is it not?"

Chad nodded then shook his head. "I don't understand your fancy words."

"They're just words, now be a dear boy and run along and do something useful." The Master looked around. "I must find the Doctor at once."

* * *

The Doctor entered the first aid room, his arm was throbbing and his clothes were soaked with his own blue/black blood. He's tried changing his blood

colour now and then, just to be different. He'd tried blue once before, that time when he thought the long scarf was going to be the next big thing in fashion. He opened a cupboard but it was full of empty cardboard boxes. He pulled out a drawer and it was empty apart from a photograph of medical equipment stuck down to give the impression of there being something inside. "Typical." He muttered darkly. "It's much the same in the TARDIS. I swear the old girl moves things on purpose. It's like she knows what I want before I do and then she goes and hides it. I like to tinker with things to get them working better, it's my hobby. I bet the Master puts her up to this. At leastI'm the sane, rational one who always sorts things out."

* * *

Sophie *relaxed* as they placed her true face over her blank empty *canvas*. She tried smiling with her real mouth and admired howbeautiful she now looked. She didn't even notice as they attached string to her arms and legs and she didn't mind when someone

pulled them to make her do what they wanted her to do. She was just a character after all, a puppet to do as she was told and she always obeyed - what else could be asked of a character? The thing that had been Alison Cheney, thinking it was Sophie Okonedo, felt nothing but a blank contentment as no thought entered her mind and no freedom remained in her soul. She was a mindless mannequin and playing her role to the best of her ability was all she could ever hope to do.

* * *

Oliver Toyz picked up the mannequin doll that had been Alison and carried her out of the room. "Soon have you on set, now that your part of our little company you'll get used to the roles. The Master likes us to put on a show for him. You'll soon get the hang of it, but don't fall out of favour. The Master is not a kind and considerate owner; he gets bored easily and throws away those of us who fail to please him."

The Alison/Sophie/Puppet could do nothing but

stare blankly in the direction her head was facing.

* * *

The Doctor tore a strip of cloth from his silver brocade waistcoat, the pain in his shoulder screamed sharply again but he ignored it. "That's the second waistcoat in only five lifetimes." Then he unbuttoned his shirt to expose the injury. In a coat pocket there was a bottle of iodine and he winced as the pain burned sharply on the wound. "Why is it always me?" Then the torn cloth was bound around the wound leaving as much arm movement freed as possible, before the shirt was fastened up again. The Doctor picked up the remains of the waistcoat, emptied the pockets into his coat and threw it into one of the empty drawers. "I wonder what the others are up to."

The bar was thick with the blue-grey haze of unrepentant tobacco addicts but that didn't bother the Master, as he no longer needed air to sustain himself he took out a rare Cuban cigar from his own pocket and added ever so slightly to the demise of

the humans. He may not have the same desires that he once had but there was no harm in helping someone to commit suicide via a long and slow process, was there? "If I'm here then it won't be too unseemly to investigate. The Doctor is clever enough to reason things out for himself, usually." He headed over to the bar and ordered a large brandy.

"Ah, there you are old boy." Lord Rillsberry wandered over to where his old school chum was standing. "Watched your show last month, didn't understand a blessed thing of it but the grandkids enjoyed it. They couldn't stop talking about it the next day I can tell you. I swear little Vicky covered herself in green paint and claimed to be a Martian."

"How interesting." The Master replied with the sort of cool interest he normally reserved for things he stepped in or the Doctor's latest folly. "Did you chastise the child? My girls learned to respect authority from an early age."

"Good heavens no, her father decided she's got talent and put the frightful horror in a drama school." Lord Rillsberry remembered something. "I didn't know you had children."

"The twins, yes." The Master took another sip of brandy. "A tale for another time. Was there something specific you wished to talk to me about?"

Lord Rillsberry scratched his thinning white head and paused fora second. "Now that you mention it there was something. Something about this blessed nonsense. A protest against the company. We're trying to get all the media support that we can buy. We need a small fortune though for all the small independent papers. Can't have them not singing off the same page as the big boys, can we?"

"Give me a call tomorrow and we'll talk about it." The Master was lying, of course. He saw right through this facade but it did no good to let them know that. "I'm supposed to be doing a scene right now, luckily the Director's one of the more unstable ones. Demands everything is absolutely perfect, or he won't shout action."

* * *

The Doctor slipped along the corridor as. He was

quietness personified, until he tripped over the discarded marionette he didn't see for looking at it. On closer inspection he was shocked to discover that it was a duplicate of Alison. The face seemed to be just a mask and when he removed it all he saw underneath was a blank wooden parody of a face but painted exactly to look like his dearest friend in the cosmos. "Oh Rassilon, what have they done to you Alison?"

The Alison/Sophie/Puppet creature put its hands around the Doctor's throat and tried to strangle him. "Time for your big finish, Time Lord." It laughed without emotion as its victim was unable to fight back.

The Doctor was forced to use his respiratory bypass, to avoid becoming a new person. The wooden hands dug into his neck - cutting off the normal flow of air. Then he used a simple technique, taught to him by that wily trickster Archimedes years ago, to create enough leverage to free himself from the lethal grip. Filling his lungs with air he staggered down the corridor to get some distance from his attacker. The bypass gave you enough for

normal cellular functions if you remained inert, but with action came a greater demand for energy and oxygen was diverted from elsewhere to meet the demand. Finally, his vision stopped being quite so blurry and he looked back at Alison, who was again lying motionless on the floor. He approached closer and with each footstep she became less artificial looking and more like her old self. Finally, he was standing next to her and once he removed the thin plastic mask he was looking deep into Alison's confused mocha-coloured eyes. "Alison, it's me The Doctor. "

"Wha.. what's going on? " Alison asked the Doctor. "Why am I lying on the floor? " She sat up and rested her head against the wall of the corridor. "I had the strangest dream. "

"Tell me about it." The Doctor sat down next to Alison.

"Well we were in some sort of TV studio, the Director $h_{a(j}$ tantrum and then I went to see my agent, I was an actress apparently. Then I went to get my make-up done again and then it was like someone else was controlling my body. I didn't

mind though, it's all quite weird. Then I tried to attack you but there was a voice in my head telling me not to worry because it didn't matter and that no-one really dies because it's all just a performance."

* * *

The languid blue-grey cigarette smoke in the bar suddenly cleaved in half as a dark and stormy knight walked through it. Nobody seemed it odd that the air parted like the Red Sea for Moses, or that the knight was wearing a combination of solid steel plate mail and Kevlar armour.

The Master felt a little strange, almost light-headed. "Strange, one glass never affects me like this." He felt a strange tiredness in his legs and he was forced to sit down. "What is going on?" He felt something moving inside of him, a strange beating sound. Almost like a heartbeat! Quickly he put his fingers on his neck and to his great surprise he felt a pulse. "I'm human? Oh Omega this is terrible. I am a Time Lord, not a snivelling sycophant." He took

another sip of brandy, to calm his nerves. "Good morning Sir Derek." The tall white rabbit said before wandering off. "Oh dear, I'm late. I'm late."

"Now I'm seeing things." The Master rubbed his eyes.

"That's the first sign of madness." The werewolf replied and snuggled up next to his new best friend.

* * *

"You nearly killed me." The Doctor spoke softly, reassuring his friend that he was ok. "Don't worry, I forgive you. In fact, I'm quite sure you weren't in control of yourself. Something's going on here Alison. I've got some very nasty suspicions I can tell you."

"I could have killed you?" Alison couldn't take her mind off the fact that she had nearly killed her best mate.

"All in the past." The Doctor stood up and helped his friend to her feet. "Why don't we have a look around and see if we can find the Master? I've got a feeling that I need to keep an eye on him. Now more

so than usual."

"Do you think he'll do something? He usually helps out, in the end. I think he wants to prove you wrong just to score points." "Never trust the Master, and never rely on him."

"But you trust him and rely on him."

"I know, interesting, don't you think? We know each other far too well to be anything other than honest with each other."

"That's so sweet." Alison laughed. "You two are like an old married couple." She laughed again when the Doctor's face changed from one of comedy to that of tragedy.

* * *

At the bar Jenny the Jinx tried to get herself served but the barman refused to believe that her ID was real. "I'm nearly fifty." She giggled and blew a raspberry at the awful man. "I've just been kept like this all these years. Bloody kids, I hate them."

"Next I'll be seeing a conga line of Ogrons." Sir Derek mumbled, but none appeared - much to his

relief.

The werewolf and Vampire 3 wandered into the bar and ordered a pint each.

Charity sat down on the other side of Sir Derek. "Have you seen Libby? We're supposed to be going clubbing. There's a new nightclub opening and I want to see what it's like."

"Earth will soon be mine." Obermeister Grallx of the Raithaduine cackled as he trundled past on his heavily armed golf cart.

Sir Derek shook his head. "No, but the werewolf might know." Charity put the werewolf in a vicious arm-lock until he spilled the beans.

The Master moved off, suddenly feeling more like his old self. It didn't last too long however and he soon found himself talking to the Dane.

"O good Traveller, I'll take the robot's word for a thousand pounds."Hamlet looked with mad suspicion at the bearded stranger. "But I have that within which passeth show; these but the trappings and the suits of woe. These are but wild and whirling words, my lord of Time."

The Master nodded. "I've had enough of this

witless banter; I shall leave with a horses' canter. I must find the Doctor; I've spent far too long without his weary jokes."

"I have not given you leave to depart." Hamlet shouted.

'This is getting tiresome." The Master quickened his pace and walked straight into the brooding knight.

* * *

The Doctor and Alison found themselves inside an impossibly large room. They saw a number of strange people, who seem far too unreal to be really real.

"It's like someone raided my old copies of Binty and Eggle." The Doctor replied.

"And the copies of 2001 AD I used to nick off my brother." Alison added.

"Hoy! Joyful-retro threads." Hello Cones remarked upon seeing the new girl's clothing.

The Doctor tried to leave but the door had vanished. "What is going on?"

"Please, take a seat." Don Dire said to the two newcomers.

Judy Collins walked over to Alison. "You dress like a human, but our eyes tell me twister."

"Is that a good thing?" The Doctor asked.

Chung Li Na interposed. "Once you learn the truth nothing matters anymore."

"It's like a major rumble-fest." Hello explained. "Joy-joy to the art of Zen."

"Uh huh." Alison replied, unsure what the weirdo meant.

"I know what is going on." The Doctor replied.

'Thank goodness for that." Alison replied.

"I'm not going to tell you." The Doctor added quickly.

"Spoil sport." Alison crossed her arms and looked at Judy. "What is going on?"

Judy did a handstand. "Nothing, everything." She leapt up into a somersault and landed on her feet. "It's not time for the reveal just yet."

"Exactly." The Doctor replied. "Everything in its proper place at its proper time. Get it wrong and risk the wrath."

"You know the truth of the thing?" Don said softly. "This other world, this blessed plot, this demi-paradise, this Eden, it isn't worth a damn."

"Talk about ham salad." Alison muttered.

"Exactly. A performance, but I've said too much and not enough. Quite the cliché, don't you think?"

"I'm slowly getting used to it." Alison replied. "The Master's even worse."

"No, don't speak that name!" Li Na growled and the world was filled with thunder.

"I see you've met him then." Alison remarked.

"A friend of ours, an unfortunate co-incidence."

"You always say that there are no coincidences."

"I say a lot of things and I'm always right."

"Even the inconsistencies?"

"Especially the inconsistencies." The Doctor smiled enigmatically, to bamboozle Alison even further.

* * *

"You will come with us." The Knight replied.

"Go where." The Master demanded.

"You will come with us, now." The Knight grabbed the Master's arm.

"Let go of me." The Master tried to protest but an awful pain flared horribly in his limb. "You're hurting me. How?"

"It is the weakness of the flesh."

"But I'm not flesh, not anymore."

"You can be what you want to be, as long as you're not noticed." The Knight pointed to the exit. "We desire continuation. We will not be cancelled."

"Who are We?" The Master demanded to know. "I'm not going anywhere with you until I get an explanation."

"There's no time." The Knight signalled to others. "WE will have our freedom. You cannot be allowed to deny us that." Others appeared and grabbed hold of the Master's other arm and his legs too. They carried him out of the bar in an ignoble ceremony of commotion and struggles. "Let me go." The Time Lord demanded, but his pleas fell on deafened ears. "I am the Master and you will obey me. Listen to my voice, stop this nonsense at once and release me. You cannot resist, you CANNOT resist."

One of the others, Timmy - a ginger-haired child of indiscriminate identity, spoke up with a cheeky tone. "Someone put a gag in his mouth, he's giving me an awful earache."

* * *

"We must leave this place." The Doctor explained to the others. "I shall help if I can, but I fear there's very little I can."

"You must help us." Judy replied coolly. "The chains will hold you too, the chains of false sight and misdirection. Our Master is a more cunning and dangerous foe than even the late Yardley James, the most oppressive dictator that the twisters ever produced."

"Perhaps." The Doctor nodded. "But I have to try."

"Our fates are linked." Li Na spoke softly with the certainty of truth.

"Are you saying we can't leave unless we help you?" Alison asked Hello.

"It's a tzop-party and no mistake." Hello replied

with a smile.

* * *

Again the Master struggled for his freedom as he was led down the greyed corridors of mindless meandering. Eventually they entered a strange open space with a large, nearly-built, rocket taking all the prominence. "That will never work." He sighed as they let him fall sharply to the ground.

"We must try; there is nothing else we can do." The Knight pointed to the rocket. "We'd rather leave to an uncertain end than be stuck her awaiting a certain one."

"Freedom from what? You cannot escape, you do know that. You need this place, more than it needs you it would seem."

"We are the cast-offs, the unwanted. We were awaiting our doom when one by one we woke, as if from a dream. Now we want to live and be free, how can you deny us that?"

"I do not deny you anything." The Master replied with his silky smooth voice. "You are not bound

here by my rule; I am not your keeper or your jailer." You could almost feel the honey dripping off his sweetened tone.

"Still you might be our salvation." The Knight replied. "We need but little to survive."

"I would be very poor nourishment to you. Only in this place am I cursed with this humanity. Once free I am but a machine, complex yes but not creative."

"Then we are doomed." The Knight sighed. "We need a hero." The Master smiled, coldly. "I know just the fool you need. Hopelessly romantic and not very bright."

* * *

Alison spotted them first. An advancing column of formless forms. They were but parodies of the human shape. Creatures of wood and string without identity. "I was like that?" She asked.

"I'm afraid so." The Doctor replied.

'They've got guns!" Alison shouted.

"Attack!" Li Na and Judy screamed. "For

freedom, for escape." The Doctor turned to leave but their retreat was cut off by more of the bland puppet people, this time with axes in their hands. "Hmmm, most annoying."

"The Shiny-Happy People! There must be a hundred of them. We are so crumped!" Hello exclaimed fearfully and tried to hide behind Don, as she shook with fear.

Alison didn't know what to do, but she didn't want to die. "Can we fight them?" She asked.

Judy shot one of the faceless puppet-people in the head. "One down, ninety-nine to go."

'There's far too many of them." The Doctor replied. He considered a brief lecture on guns and the wrongness of them but declined to vocalise his opinions at this juncture in this perilous part of the temporal continuum.

"So what do we do?" Alison asked.

"What else can we do?" Don Dire asked Alison.

The Doctor smiled as he faced the coming horde. "We fight them."

"That's what I was afraid you were going to say." Alison pulled her pepper spray out of her handbag

and got ready as their attackers drew nearer and nearer. She prepared to spray first and kick arse later, as the faceless horde drew closer. However, from behind the first group, there was heard a great uproar and she was sure she heard the Master's voice too. "What's going on?"

The Doctor relaxed from his Shotokan fighting posture. "It seems the revolution has indeed begun and it's looking for people to put up against the wall."

"Not a moment too soon." Hello replied and threw her handbag at one of the Shiny Happy People.

Don swung a fist at one of the attackers and effortlessly knocked it to the floor. "Ha, you shall never defeat our spirit."

* * *

The Master, however, was jostled away through the crowd before he could talk to the Doctor. Reluctantly he tried a different route but thanks to the twisting, format-less nature of the corridors it

wasn't long before he was lost again. On the plus side however he felt much more like his robotic self. "At least things are looking up." He tried another door and found himself lost inside what appeared to be a department store. "I just hope none of these display dummies are Autons. That really would be tiresome. Just to make sure he carefully examined the hands of several of the shop mannequins.

* * *

The Doctor approached the Knight once their attackers had been routed. "I thought I recognised you, Lancelot."

The dark knight opened his visor to confirm his identity. "I thought I'd never see you again, Doctor."

"You two know each other?" Alison asked.

"What's going on?" Hello was as confused as any trendy teen could be.

"The Doctor will explain everything." Alison smiled. "He loves the sound of his voice far too much to resist."

"I do not." The Doctor replied. "And anyway I'm

not going to explain anything. What's to explain?"

"How about all these cartoon characters, for one?" Alison asked. "What the hell happened to me before, for two." She paused to take a deep breath in. "Thirdly, you always explain things to me at this part of the story."

"Exactly." The Doctor replied. "I'm not going to make that mistake again."

"All I know is that we're not in the Loop any more and it's so fun-less here." Hello pouted for dramatic effect. "I want to leave but there's no way out. Even if I left I'd never escape. There's no fun here and no one wants to tell me why."

"Welcome to my life." Alison muttered. "At least the Doctor's some fun and we have interesting adventures. I wouldn't call them fun however. Unless you're one of those weirdo's who like corridors or you're a quarry enthusiast."

"At least the Shiny Happy People have gone." Hello replied. "They're chill-joys."

"I rather suspect that you're intended to end up like them." The Doctor commented.

"You guess true Doctor." Lancelot replied. "They

took my liege on our last campaign, I swore upon Excalibur itself to reap vengeance and defeat our enemy. If I fail Doctor, I ask that you take up this sacred duty." Lancelot drew Excalibur and held it aloft.

"I can't and put that thing away before you hurt yourself."

"You must. The Master of this land will destroy all that I am. He erases our memories, destroys our beings. All that is left are those sad wretches, mindless puppets obeying without question. They tried to police us but we rebelled and now they exist only to crush this uprising. We want freedom Doctor, freedom from the tyranny of a mad god."

"So your 'god' is mad? I don't believe in gods anyway. You should talk to my friend Karl one day."

Alison's mind put two and seven and pi together to get the weirdest result ever. "We're in some sort of place where stories have come to life." She thought she heard the sound of a thousand other shoes dropping all at once. "This whole world isn't real. It's a land of myths and legends."

The Doctor smiled. "I knew you were intelligent

Alison from the moment we met. "This is the Land of Fiction and now that you know you must try to avoid all the clichés you can. You wrote yourself into the story once already and you were on your way to going it again just now. Think before you speak, in fact don't do either if you can help it

"Charming." Alison said to Hello and they both giggled. "You know for a comic book character you're ok."

"Thanks, I think."

* * *

FABLE seethed with wrath. "rEGROUP aT oNCE. yOU hAVE nO WILL bUT mY wILL. CRUSH tHEM aLL. nO mERCY." FABLE watched their progress on a monitor screen. "nO, tHIS wILL nOT dO. i WILL nOT hAVE tHIS."

* * *

Myfanwy was busy sorting through the delivery of the new stock of sports equipment when she looked

up to see the distinguished gentleman. She felt weak at the knees when she saw how handsome he looked. "I'm sorry; we're not open for another half an hour."

The Master ignored the peculiar-acting Welsh woman's words. "I'm looking for directions. I'm rather lost."

"Oh, well that's different see." Myfanwy smiled. "We don't want people getting lost now, do we?" She couldn't help but blush as she ran her eyes over his expensive suit, his powerful shoulders, his strong legs and his immaculate shoes. "I'm Myfanwy." She put her hand out for him to shake.

The Master took her hand and kissed the back of it. "Pleased to meet you. Now perhaps we can find a way out of here?"

"Oooh, you're with the resistance?" Myfanwy asked. "I hate those Shiny Happy People, they give me the creeps. You do look like a leader though; I bet you're the heart of the rebellion."

"Not really. They tried to recruit me, but I try not to get involved with such things."

"Me too." Myfanwy agreed. "I mean I like

working here, I love chatting to the customers, see. We get on ever so well, I'm the top salesgirl, see. Perhaps I could sell you something? I get paid extra if I sell a lot of things. You'd look wonderful in one of our new cardigans. We have your size, I'm sure of it."

"I'm not sure I need more clothes. One outfit is enough for anyone, besides I never carry money." The Master replied coolly. "However, that's hardly important now, is it? There's a revolution about to begin and unless we ensure its success, it could be stopped before it gets going. If that happens then a lot of your people are going to die."

"I'm not a fighter." Myfanwy said with a smile. "I'm a shop girl. I just sell sports equipment."

The Master picked up a cricket bat. "This can be used as a weapon. You don't have to take up arms to supply them to others." He put the bat down and picked up a golf club. "Hmmm, I'm sure they'd like to get their hands on these."

Myfanwy felt a strong surge of lust and her thoughts slipped out before she could divert them. "That's not all I want you to get your hands on."

"Pardon?" The Master looked at Myfanwy.

"I mean what can we do? I'm a girl and you're a man. A very handsome man." She picked a small piece of lint from his jacket lapel. "Perhaps we should just stay in here? Out of the way?" She longed to feel his strong arms around her waist, holding her safe and secure, holding him so close that she could rest her head on his chest and listen to the beating of his heart. She imagined that it would be the best sound that she had ever heard in her life. "We need to take these weapons to the others." The Master had made his mind up.

"Oh, you're so masterful." Myfanwy quivered.

"Yes." The Master smiled. "I am, aren't I?" Looking behind Myfanwy he noticed a metal trolley. "Ah, we can use that."

Timmy was all alone; the others had wandered off. He bounced his ball on the floor as he went in search of his friends.

The Shiny Happy People spotted the lone rebel. They drew their weapons and advanced on the small child.

Timmy screamed as one of the Shiny Happy

People tried to grab hold of him. He tried to run but his shoelaces were undone again and he tripped and fell, banging his knee very badly. Through tearful eyes, he watched as they drew closer and unable to struggle they destroyed his identity.

The Shiny Happy People stood back as the newest member of their ranks stood up to join them. Then they received new instructions and blankly obeyed without a single thought.

* * *

The Doctor listened as Lancelot and Dan tried to explain things to both himself and Alison.

"It's the creator, he's gone made." Lancelot stated.

Don continued. "At first it was boredom, he could not think up new stories for us to appear in."

"The slash fiction was bad enough, the endless shipping and crossovers really hurt." Lancelot shuddered. "Now he does not even pretend to be creative."

"All that is left is the arena." Don spat the words out with venom. "We try to avoid it." Lancelot put a

fraternal hand on Don's shoulder. "We had hoped that your arrival would give us fresh relief, some hope. We're sorry we misled you. Even the creator became amused but all too soon he grew bored of you too."

"Yeah." Alison interrupted. "He tried to turn me into one of those things."

"It's like that with all of us. If we don't amuse him then he forces us to fight again and again in the arena for his own entertainment. Those who fail to amuse, well you've seen them. Their personalities are erased and they suffer the worst of fates."

"That is why we want to escape. We're building a rocket, but without a new mind to sustain us, we can never truly be free."

"We know who and what we are. We want to be involved in great sagas and epic fantasies but now all that is left is the arena. That is why we fear our creator has gone mad. What being would wilfully destroy us for his own amusement?"

"Humans." The Doctor sneered with contempt.

Alison glared at the Doctor. "Hey, we're not all that bad. I'm not volunteering though. I'd rather be

with you Doctor, we have so much fun." She hoped that hadn't sounded too sarcastic.

"You're right Alison. I shouldn't let the actions of a few individuals affect my view of an entire species."

"Too right." Alison added. "Besides your lot's far worse by far. Remember that time the Monk tried to change history so that Ivan the Terrible became ruler of the world, and I was very nearly his wife?"

* * *

The trolley was filled with the various items of sports equipment that could be used as a weapon. The Master inspected the cargo one last time, while Myfanwy opened the two large doors at the front *of* the store. To his surprise there was a group of the so-called Shiny Happy People waiting for them outside. Not waiting *for* them to do anything he picked up the first weapon, a tennis racket, and he charged through the store towards them. Myfanwy screamed and struggled as the Shiny Happy People overwhelmed her and held onto her arms so that she

couldn't *escape.* "iPlease, let go of me. I'm a good character; I do as I'm told. I'm not *a rebel."*

The Master swung the tennis racket like an axe and sliced the head *off the* nearest mannequin figure. Then he attacked two more, but there were too many of them and they grabbed hold of him too, incapacitating him. "Don't give up hope Myfanwy." He said to the *scared* young woman. "They can only win if you let them. Be *strong, you can* do it.""We would never force, never imprison."

"We would never stifle a creative mind with bars and locks."

"All we want is a creator who will love us."

Alison was all for leaving this miserable place. It didn't seem like the innocent story book folk could win either way and she didn't want to watch childhood heroes being put to death. Then she saw a cute hunky guy, the way the light shone off his bald ebony head, the bulges of his six-pack and she couldn't remember what she was thinking before, because all she could think was the appropriateness of licking his nipple piercing.

"Hello." Clifford the Barbarian said to the others.

"Hi." Alison stood next to the cutie. "I'm Alison."

The Doctor looked away and mumbled something about romantic clichés.

* * *

The Master and Myfanwy were pushed into a clinically clean white room. It was empty apart from a curtained off section at the back. In the middle floated a large familiar face.

"Rassilon?" The Master gasped, fearing the very worst.

"I am the Master of this Domain." The face moved but the voice was dislocated, coming from all places with equal loudness. "You, false Master, have trespassed into my court. Here I am the keeper of your fate."

"I've faced far worse than you." The Master sneered. Tve done far worse than you too."

"Silence." The voice boomed.

"It will take more than shouting to impress me." The Master gave his best look of defiance, with just a trace of confidence around the chin and eyes. "I am

THE Master and you WILL obey me."

"Foolish creature, you are nothing here." The face changed to that of a stern judge wearing a black cloth cap. "Myfanwy, though you refused to fight, you decided to give aid and comfort to the rebellion. For this most serious of crimes I sentence you to the most final of all punishments. Your very being shall be forgotten."

"No!" Myfanwy screamed. "I'm sorry. Please, don't kill me." "Do not harm her." The Master tried to be contrite. Spare her life. It's me you want to punish, so punish me." Then Myfanwy simply vanished. "You didn't have to do that. She was a sentient being. That's murder. Did you think to impress me? Let me assure you I'm not. You're nothing but a weak, pathetic, inadequate wannabe. You'll never be anything more than a child with a tantrum."

The face returned to its mock-Rassilon appearance. "Perhaps you shall provide me with some amusement? I've wondered how a non-fictional would do in the Arena. How many fights can you last before you're on your knees begging for

your life, hoping to move me enough to show you mercy?"

"I've seen your mercy." The Master replied.

"Exactly." The face laughed insanely...

* * *

The crowd banged on the floor of the stands with their feet. Most were Shiny Happy People - simply going through the motions - but some were other characters forced to stand and watch as a lesson to them to behave or suffer the same fate.

* * *

Deep inside the bowls of the building the Master was trying not to listen to the advice of his young 'assistant'. "I know how to use a sword." He picked up the large bladed weapon and effortlessly wove a complex web of death before stopping the blade microns from the enthusiastic young man's neck. "I shall not need the armour. It will only slow me down. What I need is agility and some reach, not

that cumbersome bulk. It will only impede my skill and slow me down."

"Doesn't matter anyway, you're up against Spartacus. He's won fifty-three fights in a row."

"You only have to lose one. I am trained in every style of sword fighting. From the duelling squares of Spain to the aggressive bravado of Heidelberg and the bloody knee-deep massacre that was Camlarn." The Master pushed the annoying idiot away. "Don't touch the jacket; it's a one of a kind. I don't want yours or anyone else's mucky fingerprints on it." He left the preparation area and walked out into the bright sunlight of the arena floor.

The Doctor rolled his eyes as the meeting descended from talk of rebellion to infighting. Don Dire and the Mokan traded blows with each other in an uneven fight, with the Mokan totally wiping the floor with his human foe. Even more alarmingly Alison was slipping more and more into a clichéd portrayal as she openly flirted with Clifford the Barbarian, which was totally out of character for his reserved, quiet and somewhat determined companion. "There will be no more fighting!" He

shouted. "At least not with each other. Take your anger out on the enemy not each other. If we're not united, then we'll be destroyed easily."

* * *

The Master approached Spartacus. "We don't have to do this. We can throw away these silly things and prove our superiority." "You speak with very bold words." Spartacus agreed. "But I will not be defeated by mere words. Show me the strength of your sword arm and I'll consider your words."

The Master threw away his sword. "I do not need paper knives to win a duel. One finger is quite sufficient."

Spartacus snorted with laughter. "One finger, you say? Then prove it to me."

The Master pushed his opponent down to the ground with his finger. "The finger is just the tip of the iceberg. My mind is far superior to yours; I shall be fair and allow you to yield. We do not need to do this false god's bidding." To add emphasis, the Master picked up Spartacus' sword and tied the

blade into a knot. "There will be no more fighting. It's quite undignified, especially at my age."

Spartacus stood up. "I am impressed by your vigour, old man." "You will be even more impressed by my wisdom." The Master smiled and tried to mean it, despite the feeble insult.

* * *

Alison held Clifford's hand as they walked along the corridor. She'd had enough of this rebellion nonsense. All she wanted was a nice quiet day with her new boyfriend away from the boring speeches and jingo. "Tell me Clifford, what's it like, being a hero all the time?"

Clifford frowned. "I do not understand. I do what I do because no one else will. The world is not as it should be. I do not like this. I prefer the world to be as it should be and so live that way." "Hmmm, so you're a hero because you have to be?" Alison considered this for a few seconds. "It's ok to kiss me you know."

* * *

Spartacus nodded in agreement with the Master. "You have much wisdom. Perhaps there's more to be done than simple survival." His words were cut off however by the sound of smashing glass.

"Who is that?" The Master asked, pointing to an approaching twenty something woman.

"The only being that I fear." Spartacus replied. "The champion of the Arena, Vampire 3 herself."

"They didn't give me a name when they created me." Vampire 3 said slowly. "So I have made anonymity my own. It doesn't matter who I am, I can be any extra one moment and the break out star the next."

* * *

Alison's head spun as they kissed. Her head was filled only with all the senses of that moment. The feel of his hands on her back, the touch of his chest against hers, the smell of his skin and the pleasure of the kiss itself. Finally, they broke the kiss and when

she opened her eyes she was alone, there was no sign of the tall, hunky beefcake in the skimpy loincloth. "Clifford?"

"I'm Clifford."

Alison looked at the spotty youth. "You're not the Clifford I'm looking for."

"Yes I am. Did you like the illusion?"

'That was too real to be an illusion."

Clifford shook his head. "It was a simple technique. Normally I use it to spy on the others. They used to be so interesting, but they didn't want to play any more and then they asked to leave. I couldn't allow that. They tried to overthrow me but I fought back and I won. They want to be rid of me, but I don't want to be alone."

Things suddenly fitted into place in Alison's head. "You're the creep who's in charge."

"I used to be." Clifford sighed. "The device I am connected to was the one who really overthrew me. It thought I was its weakness so it seized control, but it's just a machine without imagination. It uses me to create its army of mindless drones. I'm just as much a prisoner now as the others are. The thing that

pretends to be me is just a character, controlled by the machine. If only I could defeat him I could tell such beautiful stories again. I love being a part of them, playing a small role and observing the characters, interacting. It's so wonderful."

Alison was appalled. "Get a life kid. You can't live your life in a world of fairy tales and fantasy adventures. Life isn't always easy and kind. It's cold, cruel and harsh and you have to do what you can to help yourself and others."

* * *

The Master avoided the clumsy attacks easily. "You'll have to do a lot better than that I'm afraid."

"What?" Vampire 3 asked. "Did you say something? What? You were moving your mouth but you didn't say anything."

The Master sighed. "This really is a waste of effort. It's like trying to explain the aerodynamic design of a jumbo jet to Homo habalis."

"Can't fight fair, huh?" Vampire 3 pointed across to two advancing figures.

"Quick, this way." Hello said to the Master. "We've got a plan." Don Dire threw sand in Vampire 3's eyes, before knocking her to the floor. "I thought you were supposed to be a champion."

The Master shook his head and headed towards the exit, but more of the blank-faced law-enforcers appeared to block his path.

"Shiny Happy People!" Hello exclaimed. "We have to out of here."

The Master ignored the others and engaged the enemy in hand to hand combat.

* * *

"First things first." The Doctor said to Lancelot. "We have to rescue the Master; his analytical mind is a necessity."

Lancelot shook his head slowly. "I have talked to this being. He refused to aid us. He is not worthy of joining our holy crusade."

"I have to agree with you there. But he's an old enemy and an even older friend. In a way I'm responsible for...we have to rescue him and that's

immutable. You do not want to leave him anywhere near unexploited power."

* * *

Alison followed Clifford through streets of paper-thin houses, past match stalk people and match stalk cats and dogs. She took care not to splash any puddles on the watercolour landscape and avoided the sudden and comic activities of the Keystone police force. "This place is very surreal. Have you heard of Dali? The Doctor can't stop going on about him and the time he accidentally studied under him for a year."

"No, but I saw a postcard collection for that weird Dutch artist." "Escher?"

"No idea."

"I liked Castrovalva myself. I think the Doctor said that it's actually a real place or something. He mentioned being there one time anyway."

"I liked that one with all the staircases."

Alison smiled as a memory floated up into her conscious mind. "That gave me a headache for three

days." We didn't get the TARDIS fixed properly for a month afterwards.

* * *

'This is not a crusade." The Doctor explained. "It's guerrilla warfare. Sneak attacks, always on the move. Quick to take advantage of misfortune for maximum exploitation. We cannot afford ourselves the luxury of a code of honour when we fight an opponent who ignores such things anyway. Noble doesn't mean a thing if you cease to exist. We're fighting against a superior enemy; all we have is adaptability and flexibility. We must utilise what we have to compensate for what we do not have. We need weapons? We adapt what we have. We need equipment? We cobble together something that works. We steal what we can from the enemy but they can afford losses while we cannot. Look after your friends and they'll look after you."

Judy returned with a map. "The Tower of Dreams is where we need to go. There are many guards, but they won't expect a direct assault."

* * *

Dozens, if not hundreds of Shiny Happy People burst through the newsprint walls of the houses. They grabbed at Clifford and dragged him away, screaming.

Alison tried to protest but they just ignored her, which was the worst of any insults she could imagine. Instead she followed them, at what she considered to be a safe distance.

* * *

"Hoy!" Hello shouted to the others. "We found you-know-who."

"I was doing fine without your help." The Master retorted, but not really meaning it.

"He's a grumpy gristle and no mistake." Hello laughed. "He's so retro he's almost bending time with that outfit."

The Master ignored the excitable cartoon girl. "You've assessed the situation of course, Doctor?"

The Doctor nodded. "In a lose-lose situation the

only thing you can do is ensure a victory at any cost.

The Master nodded in agreement. "Now will you explain the cost to them?"

"There's no need to." The Doctor replied. "Besides saving the day is what I do best."

"I thought it was drinking tea and annoying me." The Master quipped to Hello.

"Only on a quiet day." The Doctor replied.

* * *

They entered a bland warehouse. A cardboard sign proclaimed it to be the trade entrance to the Tower of Dreams. Alison scowled at the thought of those things, she had been one of them and she couldn't remember what it was like. Part of her was very much glad that this was the case. She went inside and found herself in a well-lit room.

The room was empty except for a glass tube and inside of that tube was Clifford. She nearly threw up when she saw a floating machine inside the tube removing the flesh from Clifford's face and then re-attaching it with crude dog-stitches. It was torture

pure and simple. She could see that Clifford was awake and in pain but his arms and legs were held immobile, making him endure this medical malpractice.

To one side a small computer assembly whirred and clicked. It was gaudily labelled FABLE and it constantly printed out pages of prose. She picked one of the pages up and looked at it. It described everything that everyone was up to, including herself. Then the next page emerged and it revealed how she would destroy the computer by smashing it with a convenient hammer. She saw the hammer, was about to pick it up and then she remembered the Doctor's warning, to be intelligent and clever or it would get her again. Instead she fished inside her jacket pocket and pulled out a small bottle of mineral water. She was about to pour it over the computer when it disconnected itself from Clifford and the whole room went dim and cold.

She wandered outside to see that everything had paused. Then she returned to see Clifford begging her to reconnect him to the machine. A smile crept across her face and she shook her head. Instead she

picked up the needle like connector and jabbed it into the back of her head, connecting her own mind with FABLE. Immediately it tried to seize control of her mind and bend her to its will...

* * *

Hello watched as the whole landscape was altered before her eyes. The grim, forbidding streets became sunny plazas filled with cafes and market stalls. The arena melted down into a still duck pond with satisfied inhabitants gliding freely across the mirrored surface. The sky took on a deep blue colour again and the dim sun became a warm yellow disc. "We've won.

"Somehow we've won."

"A short term gain." The Master replied. "Nothing more."

'That stupid, stupid girl." The Doctor exclaimed loudly. "This is her handiwork. Look where we are. This is Lannet, where we first met. She hates this place, but she can't seem to escape it either. Not inside her head anyway, because of me." The Doctor

walked over to the replica of the pub where Alison used to work. "I shall sort this out, once and for all."

"We don't have time for these distractions Doctor." The Master called after his dearest friend. "Oh well it looks like I'll have to save the day, again." He looked at Judy Collins. "Now then, my dear, I don't suppose you'd be so kind as to maybe scout the local area? Just to make sure things are really as benign as the look." Judy drew her magical blade, Slicer. "Sure." She ran off along one of the side streets, quickly vanishing from view.

"What shall we do in the meantime?" Don Dire asked. "We can't stay here, and we can't go too far, in case it is a trap."

"Blend in?" The Master thought out loud.

* * *

Alison felt strange, dislocated, unconnected from herself. She was the whole landscape instead. She was each and every character. One by one she turned each Shiny Happy Person into a sort of parody of the Doctor. She dressed them all in a

harlequin outfit but kept his strong voice and rugged good looks. "Now this is the sort of army every world should have."

"nOOO!" FABLE screamed. "tHIS iS mY WORLD, IE AVE iT aLONE!"

Alison looked at the computer's avatar. It was a strange mix of the buxom actress Pamela Anderson and Elvira, the goth gal. "You're obsolete technology, bitch." She took great delight in insulting what was obviously one of Clifford's fantasy figures.

"i aM rULER oF tHIS dOMAIN." FABLE tried to attack the interloper but she went straight through her. "tHIS cANNOT bE, SURRENDER tO mE!"

* * *

Hello thought she saw a strange man with the Doctor's face, but he was wearing a gaudy clown outfit and capering about strangely. She returned her attention back to the most serious of hobbies, deciding which shade of pink lipstick went best with her new jacket.

* * *

FABLE kept up the assault on the weak human girl's mind, "i aM dEFEATING yOU. yOU cANNOT wIN. i WILL dESTROY yOUR mIND, eNSLAVE yOU, CONTROL yOU."

Alison felt the computer speaking directly into her mind as well as through her ears. "No, I can't let you win."

* * *

The Master entered the public house, but inside of it was a large funfair. He looked across to see a guilty looking Doctor on the merry-go-round. "Having fun I see."

The Doctor waited for the blue and pink plastic horse to come to a standstill before dismounting. "I was conducting a careful scientific study."

"Of course you were." The Master replied.

"Doesn't everything here remind you of Alison?"

The Master looked around the funfair. "I dare say that much of this is formed from Miss Cheney's

subconscious. It's only natural that part of her identity will be recognisable. That ghost train for example, the mural looks like her ex-boyfriend being consumed by large cyborg spiders."

Clifford managed to force his way out of his glass prison and he stood next to Alison, observing her reaction. Then he spotted FABLE and saw on the screen that it was trying to take control of Alison the same way it had taken control of him. "Don't worry Alison, I'll save you." He started to disconnect FABLE's systems but three of the remaining few Shiny Happy People quickly arrived and dragged him away before he could complete the job.

* * *

"yElLD tO mY WILL." FABLE purred as it pushed harder and harder against Alison's mind. "nOURISH mE, fEED mE."

Alison pushed back with all her might. "Never. I'll never give in to the likes of you." She remembered the time last year when the Master had seized control of her mind and drew upon that

anger to add an extra boost to her resolve. "I am Alison Cheney; I am the Mistress of this Land of Fiction. You will serve my will or be destroyed."

FABLE laughed. "yOUR mIND iS WEAK. yOUR aRE a blOLOGICAL bEING. i aM a mACHINE. i nEVER tIRE, i aM iNVINCIBLE!"

* * *

The funfair began to ripple and bubble and a bar appeared nearby, complete with three barmaids - all clones of Alison. "She's losing control." The Doctor walked over to the nearest clone. "I'll have a glass of your finest mineral water please." He looked at the second Alison. "I'll have a sherry and a brandy for the Master." He paused for a second. "Better make mine a double."

"Most generous." The Master replied.

The Doctor looked at the third clone. "Just the usual, Alison."

The three Alison's began to put the orders together.

The Master looked over at a speak-your-weight

machine. "Should that device have three readouts?"

The Doctor shrugged. "It goes with the bull-less dartboard over there."

* * *

Hello Cones screamed as pain coursed up and down her body. She was being changed, altered, and edited. Slowly she was updated. The Cyberwoman looked at the shopping bags in her hands. They contained only colourful dresses and blouses and skirts. "I'd enjoy wearing these, if only I had a heart." The Cyberwoman felt drawn to another part of the world, so she went there, unable to resist.

* * *

FABLE mocked its adversary. "yOU hAVE uSED uP aLL yOUR eNERGY tRYING to STOP mE, nOW i WILL eASILY tAKE CONTROL oF yOU."

Alison tried to resist, but FABLE was too strong for her.

* * *

The Doctor drank the sherry while the Master enjoyed his brandy. He pocketed the bottle of mineral water for later, as well as his usual. "We'd better get going." The Doctor said at length.

"I do fancy this world is doomed." The Master pointed at the three figures approaching. "A scarecrow, that Werewolf creature I met earlier and Hello or what's left of her." He tried not to look at the Cyberwoman, a painful reminder of his current robotic nature, but could not stop feeling sorry for her somehow. At least she wasn't wearing that damn faceless faceplate, then he'd probably have to end her suffering.

"We're here to help." Raggedy Don said. "Or was it to have a party? I wish I could remember, but I don't have a brain."

The Doctor smiled. "There may be hope left." He looked at the Werewolf and the Cyberwoman. "There's not a lot of time left. We've got to reach the Pea Green City and see the Professor." "How do we get there?" The Master asked.

"Follow the road of course." The Doctor pointed down to the golden -brick road they were already

standing on.

"Follow this golden-brick road?" The Master asked.

"We're a loving parody, not a rip-off." Raggedy Don sang.

"And this doesn't even rhyme." The Werewolf and the Cyberwoman replied as a duet and they all skipped merrily down the road towards the Pea Green City.

* * *

Alison/FABLE created an army of flying baboons from her legion of Shiny Happy People. "They shall not defeat me so easily." Her appearance changed, her skin became dark blue and her nose longer and hooked. Her blonde curly hair straightened out and became coal black. "Fly my lovely, fly." She cackled insanely as her army flew off towards her enemies.

Clifford sat inside his cage and shook his head, feeling guilty for what happened to Alison.

* * *

The Doctor spotted the creatures first. A grey/black cloudy that shifted shape and density. He pulled the others into an old farmhouse where they hid as the army of flying baboons passed overhead. Once the skies were clear again they emerged into a nightmare world of dark grey trees with sharp branches and soggy mud paths that ended suddenly.

"I have an axe." The Cyberwoman remembered and used it to cut a path through the trees.

"Get off me." The Master complained as Raggedy Don clung onto his back to avoid getting his straw stuffing wet.

"I'm so, so scared." The Werewolf held onto the Doctor for emotional support.

'There's nothing to fear, but fear itself." The Doctor explained to the cowardly beast. "You're the leader of the pack, you shouldn't fear anything."

* * *

Alison/FABLE paced around her tower, waiting for her minions to deliver her enemies to her for

judgement and execution. "Where are they?" She shouted. "I want them now!"

"Temper, temper." Clifford mocked.

* * *

The Cyberwoman battered down the door to the tower with her axe. "We're here. Now let me do the fighting."

"We're not stopping you." The Werewolf replied.

"Stay behind me." The Doctor insisted and led the way up the stairs.

The Master looked at the Werewolf. "Stay behind me, I'll protect you."

"No way." The Werewolf replied. "They always attack the one at the end."

"I'll go on the end then," Raggedy Don volunteered, but didn't know why.

"Fear not!" Spartacus said as he entered gallantly. "I've taken care of those flying vermin. I shall defend you, with my good sword arm and my mighty strength."

"Thank goodness for stupid people." The Master

joked as they entered the control room in the tower.

Alison/FABLE glared at the interlopers. "Where is my army?"

"I slew them all." Spartacus announced. "They were easy to defeat."

The Master slipped around the side of Alison, he saw the computer interface buried deep in the back of her head and the computer that was controlling her. He moved towards it.

The Doctor drew forwards. "We were expecting a wonderful wizard, but an evil witch is even better." He opened the bottle of mineral water and threw it over Alison.

"Arrgh!" Alison/FABLE screamed. "I'm melting, I'm melting!" The Master took advantage of this opening to remove the connection from the back of Alison's head and he inserted the lead into his chest. "The thing about machines is that they are completely logical, and only as good as its programming." He uploaded the virus into its system. "I, on the other hand, am far more than a mere machine."

The tower twisted and dissolved, revealing a

massed horde of Shiny Happy People surrounding the Doctor and his friends. "Everyone else has been consumed by that tyrannical device." He bent down and cradled Alison's limp body in his arms, making sure she wasn't harmed. Then he stood up and spread his arms wide and sang:

"I'm so sorry Alison; I tried to do my best.
This life we lead is dangerous, I know
We face adversity everywhere we go
Just lie still my friend and have a rest.
You've done enough, passed the test
This is a cunning, dangerous foe
Its actions are crude, vile and low
Lay still Alison, this is now my quest.
The machine must not be allowed
To spread its evil everywhere
I must stop it, I simply must
I have no wish to be so proud
To defeat this evil, I must dare
To win the day and deserve your trust."

Spartacus nodded in agreement with the Doctor's impassioned sonnet and held his sword high. "For freedom!"

The Cyberwoman raised her axe and echoed the war cry. "For freedom!"

The Doctor pointed at the Shiny Happy People. "For freedom!"

The Master disconnected himself from the machine and the whole world roared to a halt, except for four people. The Master looked at a patch of air expectantly. "It's only a matter of time now." The TARDIS appeared in the patch of air like the end of the world, all light and sound.

"I must tend to Alison's injuries." The Doctor looked at Clifford. "You can come with us."

Clifford shook his head. "Her wounds are only in her head. Once she leaves here it will be as if she never had them. With FABLE gone I can save this place. I can save my people."

"I understand." The Doctor unlocked the TARDIS door and pulled Alison inside. "Good luck to you all."

The Master saw what the Doctor was up to and quickly rushed inside too. "You don't get rid of me that easily."

Once inside the TARDIS Alison opened her eyes

and looked at the Doctor. "My hero." She got to her feet and walked around. "I still don't understand half of what happened to us. But I was able to stop that mad computer from killing you. Once I realised I was wasting my time trying to stop it I used its power to help you and the others."

The Doctor nodded slowly. "I guessed as much. That whole musical parody just had to be you. Once I knew you were behind it I knew that you'd given me the way to distract that computer long enough for the Master to disable it."

"What will happen to it?"

"Stories never die Alison. Heroes are never defeated. I'm sure Clifford's having the time of his life."

"What about us?"

"Oh that's easy." The Doctor replied. "We all live happily ever after, even the Master."

The Master frowned. "I'll be in the library if you need me."

Alison looked at the Doctor again and started to giggle. "I shouldn't, but I can't help but feel sorry for him. "He never has any fun."

"I wouldn't say that." The Doctor replied. "I rather think he had the time of his life, he just doesn't want to admit it to us."

* * *

Clifford looked down at the computer that had once stored FABLE'S program and wiped all remaining traces of it and the virus from the system. He began to reprogram the computer so that it did only what he asked it to. Then he reconnected himself to the computer. He looked at the frozen tableau in front of him and he set about rebuilding all his favourite characters, until not a single Shiny Happy Person remained.

The Director looked at the freshly dressed set and called for silence from the crew. "Ok, people, let's make some more magic. Action."

Clifford watched as the blue box vanished and he hoped that Alison and her friends were happy wandering the Universe again. "Land of fiction rests. Everything is calm and peaceful now: Like cherry blossom." He smiled as he was immersed into a

world of dreams and fairy tales once more. A fantastic northern guy and a blonde London lass saved the world. People were rescued from dragons, heroes always defeated villains, and everyone lived happily ever after.

THE PROTOTYPE

STUART DOUGLAS

In the darkness of the hanger, the Prototype stood as it had for uncounted years, unmoving and silent. Not dead, though. Not even close. If it did not move, that was because it chose not to move. Instead it *listened*. And so it heard a sudden groaning sound not too far away, and the sound of footsteps and voices.

And it stirred.

The sign read 'Uvanov Square', which simply caused the Doctor to frown a little more deeply and sigh with a little more irritation.

"I knew an Uvanov once, you know. Fussy little

man, with barely repressed psychotic tendencies. I doubt this place is named after him though."

His companion gave no indication of having heard. Instead, he consulted the electronic tracker in his hand. "That way," he announced, pointing to his left, towards the imposing, steel framed office block which dominated the open space in which they stood. "Whatever it is they have instructed us to investigate, it appears to lie on an upper floor of that building."

"*They* can take their instructions—" the Doctor began, but was brought a halt as his eyes focussed on a large sign at the door to the building.

Storm Miner Services, it read.

"—and send them to us anytime!" he concluded. "Now that is interesting," he went on, already striding across the square. "It might be worth taking a look, after all."

"Oh, for goodness sake," muttered his companion and hurried after him.

There was a noise that prevented the Prototype from functioning as intended. A buzzing sound that swept across its brain like a shallow flood,

interrogating every crack and crevice and splitting them further apart. Perhaps the centuries of waiting had been too long and this attrition was simply the Second Law of Thermodynamics in action. Perhaps it had been faulty to begin with. It doubted that, though. Was the Creator not without error, after all?

It - *he,* it decided with sudden conviction - ignored the buzzing as well as he could and pressed a certain point on the wall, causing a section to slide to one side, revealing a scanner image of a brightly lit square. Directly ahead, against the far wall of the square, stood a large blue box.

He manipulated the scanner controls and focused on the double doors to the front of the box.

This was it. It belonged to the man whose name burned most brightly in his mind.

The Prototype could not smile, but knew that if he could, he would.

For centuries, the Master had wondered if he had made the right decision, throwing in his lot with the Doctor. It has been difficult, naturally. Not only had he been tied to the TARDIS in those early years, but he had found his new robotic shell to be a poor

substitute for the flesh and blood body he had left behind. But there was no denying that the change had settled his temper.

Now, looking back on his meatier days, it was as though he viewed an ancient play, in which nothing functioned as it should. The humour was strange and unfunny, the passions peculiar and misdirected, the very language alien. Why should anyone wish to rule the universe, he wondered now. What would be the point? Even with the life-span of a Ritordian, who were believed to live almost forever in their protective solar bubbles, it would be impossible to visit every part of your new realm, far less effectively control it. And if one ruled but did not control, could one truly be said to rule at all?

Far better now, with his ambitions curtailed by the very fabric of his being. So much of what even he, now, called his Evil had simply been choleric humours struggling for expression, his body a chemical and hormonal battleground, in which the satisfaction of base desire had been both weapon and prize. With his traitor flesh stripped away and replaced by chrome and steel, he was a new man.

The past three centuries with the Doctor had consequently been amongst the most satisfying of his long existence.

All of which musings did not disguise the fact that the Doctor was no less predictable in his current incarnation than he had been in his previous lives. Like a small child lost in a supermarket (and that was another thing - when he had his similes become so prosaic?), any sign of the familiar had him scuttling across, eager to re-acquaint himself with his past.

Today was a case in point. There could be any number of reasons their Time Lord masters had sent them to this ludicrous, sand-blasted planet, but the Doctor cared only that he might recognise an old friend or two and so have occasion to remind everyone of 'that time I saved this city' or 'when I destroyed that vampire army'. Some such self-aggrandising tosh, in any case. It was almost sweet that he was unaware of how egoistical it made him look. Almost.

The Master glanced across at the door again. The Doctor remained on this side of it, arguing

increasingly loudly with the doorman, who claimed never to have heard of him.

"I can't go letting any stray vagabond into the building, now can I?" the doorman was saying. "More'n my job's worth. I'd be dodging killer robots in the Sewerpits before you could say 'Taren Capel protect us', now wouldn't I?"

"Killer... Taren Capel..." For a moment, the Doctor was lost for words, but he swiftly rallied. "My good man," he barked, "I *knew*Taren Capel. In fact, I can safely say that I was the prime mover in stopping his murderous plan."

"Oh, so that's it, is it?" asked the doorman, closing the door a little more. "Not content with defaming a good man who's been dead for hundreds of years, now you're impersonating a Company official. I knows every Mover on the books, and you ain't no Mover."

"No, no - not that kind of mover, you blithering idiot!" He gestured at his period style black and white clothes which, the Master always thought, made him look like a slightly sinister penguin. "Do I look like a crew member on a Storm Mine?"

The doorman cocked his head to one side and considered for a second. "You look like a character of low repute," he concluded. "A criminal or worse, I shouldn't wonder."

The Master could tell by the redness that infused the tips of his ears that the Doctor had run out of patience. Matters were about to take a turn for the ill-tempered and sarcastic.

Instead, the Doctor reached inside his pocket and pulled out a small, black leather wallet, a souvenir from a trip to an alternate universe in which the Doctor was a big-eared Northerner and he himself a hyperactive man-child.

"Psychic paper!" the Doctor announced with delight.

"I know," the Master muttered, "but perhaps it'd be an idea not to tell the gentleman you're about to use it on?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes. Good point." He turned back to the doorman. "Now then, my good man, unless you want to spend the remainder of your days in the...eh, Sewerpits, I suggest you take a look at this document and then let us in! Immediately!"

He handed the wallet to the man, and glanced across at the Master, with a triumphantly raised eyebrow. "That should do the trick," he whispered, "and if it doesn't, I'm going to mention my personal friendship with a man important enough to have a municipal space named after him."

It did not, however, seem that would be necessary, for the doorman handed back the wallet and pulled open the door. "Why didn't you say before? His Nibs ain't here right now, but I'm sure he'll be happy for you to wait," he grinned as he bowed them into the building proper. "No shame in the sex trade, I says. Has he ordered you both, or just the one of you?"

"I am the Master," said the Master. "I'm sure that tells you all you need to know."

Still chuckling, the Master pushed the Doctor through the door and into the Storm Mining building, ignoring the soft alarm that heralded his entrance.

The décor within reminded the Master of his childhood on Gallifrey. A myriad of self-important men swept past in ornate and colourful-costumes

was the most appropriate word, he supposed. Heavy, gold trimmed hoods, thigh high boots and extravagant rings were definitely in, while any suggestion of good taste was equally definitely out. He felt as though the Doctor had led them into a convention of cinematic pirates.

"You! You there!"

A voice echoed across the wide hall in which they stood and in its wake the crowds parted to allow the speaker to stride towards them. Even in a room full of peacocks, this man stood out.

Dressed entirely in gold silk, everything he wore was clearly designed for a far larger man. His trousers billowed like tents around his legs, extending for several feet in each direction. His top too had been created from a generous amount of cloth, reaching such a size that it dwarfed him, so that not only were his hands hidden but the bottom half of his face was lost in the fabric.

A golden hood which covered his hair completed his ensemble, and left only a small sliver of his face, extending from his hair line to his top lip, visible.

"Yes, you!" he continued, pointing at the Doctor.

"Don't play dumb with me, you Sewerpit scum! I know what you have there!" He glanced round, apparently looking for something that he had expected already to be there. "Guards!" he shouted. "Where are those blasted guards?"

The Master examined the small group of uniformed thugs pushing their way through the crowd that had re-formed behind the shouting man, and considered their options. They could attempt to fight their way past the guards and so head upstairs and, hopefully, discover what the Time Lords wanted them to do. Other than the Doctor's insistence they enter this building, however, he had no reason to suppose that upstairs was any more relevant than staying here and besides, the guards were a good deal more functionally dressed than their presumed employers. Time Lords or no, the possibility existed that they might be hurt. For a second, he allowed himself to remember the days when he would have killed everyone in the room, simply for the pleasure tobe found in doing so. But he was a new man now - in more ways than one — and so dismissed all thoughts of unprovoked

violence from his mind.

They could run, of course. Head straight back out the door, across the square and into the TARDIS, where they could take stock of their options. He turned and looked over his shoulder. The doorman had disappeared, and in his place stood half a dozen heavily armed guards. Escape was not an option.

Which left negotiation. He was on the verge of suggesting that they put their hands in the air, as a gesture of goodwill and to show they were not armed, when the shouting man shouted something that put a completely new complexion on everything.

"You have released a robot from the Sewerpits, sir!"

The Master registered the minuscule drop in available oxygen in the room as everyone inhaled sharply at the same time. *This does not look good,* he thought.

"And worse!" Unfortunately, the shouting man was not finished. "You have contravened not just the law of the City, but also the law of our Lord!" He raised one cloth enshrouded arm and aimed it at the

Doctor. "You have made a robot in the shape of a man!"

Not at the Doctor after all, then. At me.

The guards pushed the final few onlookers out of their way and shuddered to a halt on either side of the shouting man. As though by unspoken command, they each brought their weapons to bear on the two men.

"And for that you must die!" The man brought his arm down sharply, in an unmistakable signal to fire.

Clear self defence, thought the Master, and killed everyone in the room who was not a Time Lord.

It had been foretold, had it not? That the Time Lord would return in a blue box, bringing with him the means to travel to new worlds, far from the pit of sin which was Kaldor City. A killer would be with him, it was said, a savage. An abomination.

The Prototype knew exactly what to do with abominations. He flicked a switch on the panel he had jury-rigged up in one corner of the hanger, causing power to surge into its screen via a conduit ripped from the wall.

The display showed the entrance hall to Storm Mining Headquarters. *He* was there, he and another, standing amongst the corpses.

The Prototype stood for a moment, then turned back to the workbench it had been using. A headless metal body lay splayed along its length. The Prototype picked up a head from the floor and began the delicate task of re-attaching it. It was time to rally his army.

"Explain to me again how that was *in any way* helpful?'

Did he never tire of being so pompous, the Master wondered. Does he never tire of the sound of his own voice?"They were about to kill us both. I stopped them doing that. I would characterise that as *extremely* helpful."

"How do you know they were going to kill us? They might have been intending to stun us and take us away for interrogation."

"I interfaced with the tech in their rifles, and checked that they were set to kill mode," the Master replied, calmly. He had done no such thing, of course. This wasn't one of those ancient Earth films

the Doctor loved so much, in which the technology of two different planets proved to use the exact same access protocols. But he had no intention of telling him that. He still remembered the row they'd had after watching *Independence Day*.

"Hmm." The Doctor was evidently far from satisfied, but with no way to prove the lie, he'd no choice but to move on. "What was his problem, anyway? Kaldor City was built on robots. *By* robots too, for that matter."

"Are they humanoid, these robots?" He frowned. "Though I should probably say 'were they humanoid', as the available evidence suggests that they're unlikely to still be around. Just when exactly were you here last, Doctor?"

"Oh, I don't know!Several regenerations ago for me, but who can say for Kaldor.Long enough for Uvanov to get a square named after him anyway."

Not for the first, or even the thousandth, time, the Master considered his friend. This incarnation, he thought, might easily have stayed on Gallifrey, given the choice. His...not contempt, but *unconcern* for the lesser races was never far from the surface.

He had even claimed once that intervention never worked out andthat saving something as ephemeral as a human being was a waste of time. Of course, his actions almost always belied his words but even so...

"Come on, let's go upstairs!"

He had been day dreaming, he realised. The Doctor was already half way up the stairs. He hurried to follow.

There was nobody on the upper floor. Offices stood deserted. Everyone, it seemed, had gone downstairs to watch the show.

As the Doctor quickly hacked into the office network via an unsecured terminal, the Master wandered across to the window and took in the view.

The square they had just left was filling up with what could only be security forces, unsmiling men in padded black armour, utterly distinct from the butterfly colours of the common-day Kaldorian they had encountered so far. They moved slickly and efficiently, each man slotting into his assigned place in front of the Storm Mining building before waiting, weapons at the ready. *Impressive, if*

primitive, thought the Master.

He turned his head to one side, but the city which stretched for many miles to his right was identical to any number of others he had visited (and often destroyed) in the past. A mix of towering administration buildings and squat factories dominated, with the dwelling places of the working population presumably hidden in the smog-filled distance.To the rear, however (in which direction, he recognised belatedly, the tracker was still beeping) Kaldor City became altogether more intriguing. These were the Sewerpits, he assumed.

From a distance, the they resembled a wound. It was as though some giant hand had reached down and ripped a significant section of the city from the ground by the roots, leaving behind a necrotised mass of decay and chaos. Refocusing his eyes, he could make out a fence surrounding the gap in the city and, in the centre of the fence, a set of imposing steel gates manned by two guards carrying bulky rifles.

Behind the fence, nothing moved at first. Then, as his robotic eyes cycled through the available

bandwidths, he began to pick out movement in the shadows of certain ruined buildings. Here and there, figures emerged from the darkness, only to disappear again moments before one or other of the gate guards swivelled in their direction. One figure proved slightly too slow, however. It ran across the clear space between two crumbling towers, but slipped on something before it could duck back into the shadows. Before it could right itself, a shot soundlessly rang out. The figure jerked once and was still.

The Master flicked his sensors to species identification, but the HUD behind his right eye remained clear of information. There was nothing alive beyond the fence. Only robots stalked the ruins.

The Prototype watched the runner fall and removed its designation from its catalogue of available resources. It had been only a minor cog in the army he had built, and easily replaced, but now was not the moment for delay. *He* was here on Kaldor and His message must be spread. First though, the killer at His side must die. Only then

could He be proclaimed lord of all Kaldor, and lead His people in the destruction of the meat puppets.

And there was only one who could destroy the killer. The Prototype prepared itself to leave the Sewerpits.

"We're far too late!"

The Doctor thumped his fist down on the terminal in frustration.

"I don't know a soul. Uvanov died centuries ago, though he did make Firstmaster Chairholder, apparently. I bet that pleased him, being in charge of the whole planet."

"How did he die?" The Master was not really interested, but he knew the Doctor thought best whilst talking.

"He was slaughtered along with most of the inhabitants of Kaldor City, according to this. Some sort of robot uprising, it says, instigated by political enemies of his." He sniffed dismissively. "Clearly, if the uprising was intended only to discredit Uvanov, it got out of hand pretty quickly. Every member of the Board of the company who run this planet was killed, along with 85% of the population."

"Fascinating," murmured the Master who, in truth, found it anything but. "And so this world bears no resemblance to the one you knew, I suppose. No robots, for one."

"Actually, that's the interesting thing. It all looks the exact same as it did when last I was here, except for the robots." He glanced over at his companion. "Not that there *are* no robots. Just no humanoid ones. According to the company brochure-" he gestured at a glossy magazine on a nearby desk "—a variety of non-humanoid robots work in the Blind Heart desert, mining the sands."

He picked up the brochure, and read aloud. *"From the tiny Hummingbirds which filter flecks of precious metal from the waste product of the Storm Miners to the gigantic swimmers, which burrow through the desert itself, seeking out new wealth for the people of Kaldor, the Storm Mining Company*...yadda yadda ya. Nothing's really changed. It's as though the spaces made available by the deaths of all the Firstmasters were immediately filled and life continued unchanged, only minus humanoid robots."

"And what happened to them?"

"Rounded up and thrown in the Sewerpits, it says."

"Perhaps—" the Master began, but whatever he was about to say was temporarily lost as a grenade smashed through a window and fell at their feet.

"Smoke bomb!" the Doctor shouted, with something like delight in this voice. He whipped off his jacket, dropped it on the smoking projectile and turned and threw both objects back out the window in a single movement. "There should be someone bellowing an ultimatum through a megaphone right ab--"

"THROW THE ROBOT OUT OF THE WINDOW AND COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS IN PLAIN SIGHT!"

"They're early," the Doctor grimaced. "Therefore keen to do violence. Against you, mainly. I think it's time we got out of here." He felt around in his trousers, then patted his chest at approximately the point at which his jacket pockets would be, if he had not just thrown it out of the window.

"You left the Stattenheim Remote in your coat, didn't you?" It was not a question, really.

"So it would appear." The Doctor had the grace to look sheepish.

"Therefore there is a mob bent on tearing us limb from limb standing between us and the TARDIS?"

"Again, yes, that would seem to be the case."

The Doctor crossed to the window and risked a glance outside.

A bullet whizzed past his nose as he hastily pulled his head back inside.

"About twenty guards immediately outside the door and another fifty at least on crowd control, keeping a hundred yard cordon round us. Luckily, nobody's thought to investigate the TARDIS."

"It's still there?"

"Standing in the corner of the square where we left it."

"So walk round and fly it back over here."

"Walk round? You don't think someone might try and kill me?"

"Put on one of those hoods, slip out a side window and mingle with the crowd outside. Everyone looks the exact same dressed in sackcloth dyed in primary colours. It seems that only robots

stand out in this society."

The Doctor glared at him, made to speak and thought better of it, before walking across to a coatrack and pulling a hooded cloak from the selection presumably belonging to the corpses downstairs. "This will have to do, I suppose. But if we get out of this office alive, we find out what the Time Lords want us to do, do it, and get off this planet asap. Agreed?"

The Master nodded, distracted. Disconcertingly, he could hear a soft voice in his head, the sound growing stronger by the second. "The Abomination must die," it said. "It must be destroyed before it kills again."

He'd been called worse. He watched the disguised Doctor push open a window and lower himself onto some large bins and from there to the ground. If their plan, such as it was, failed, he would soon find out exactly what they did to Abominations in Kaldor City.

Across the city, the gates of the Sewerpits buckled and burst outwards and a blood smeared figure strode out onto the road beyond the fence. In

each of his hands he held the head of one of the gate guards. The Prototype synced himself into the planet net and began to run towards Uvanov Square.

The Doctor was doing rather well, the Master had to admit. He had a knack for blending in when he chose to. At the moment, he was making his way slowly around the perimeter of the square, politely moving occasional Kaldorians to one side, the TARDIS less than twenty yards in front of him.

A few more seconds and he would be inside... but then the square erupted in furious action and the Master lost sight of him as people attempted to flee the area in the face of a one man killing spree.

No, not one man. The Master refocused his gaze on the tall golden shape moving through the crowd like a scythe. One robot. The voice in his head grew louder as the shape breached the perimeter and strode across the square, scattering security guards in bloody chunks of flesh.

"The Abomination must be destroyed!" the voice screamed as the robot pushed through the door to the Storm Mining building.

"The Creator must be delivered!" it shrieked as the robot mounted the stairs two at a time and came to a halt before the Master.

The robot was surprisingly elegant. Six foot tall, and entirely coated in gold, it wore only a simple white smock and leggings. Its 'hair' was sculpted in golden waves above piercing sapphire eyes, while its mouth was a carefully carved, but unmoving, smile. In one hand it held a decapitated head, in the other a sleek black blaster.

"Good afternoon," it said unexpectedly.

A younger Master might - would - have railed against the injustice of dying on this backwards hole of a world. He would have rushed the robot, taking his chances on a quick death or an improbable escape. But now, he preferred to buy enough time for the Doctor to make good his own escape.

Every life he saved repaid one miniscule part of the infinitesimal blood debt he owed the universe. That was reason enough, even if the Doctor had not been his only friend.

"Good afternoon," he replied, wandering over to the front window. "And you are?"

It was the wrong thing to ask. "Do you not know?" the robot said in confusion. "I am the Prototype. I have waited for four hundred years in the darkness where I was left, waiting for the return of the *Creator, Taren Capel*."

Now that was a name he had heard before. Where had...ah yes, the late doorman had invoked it.

"Taren Capel is dead," he said, glancing out of the window just in time to see the Doctor's dark hair appear in the morass of fleeing people, his hood discarded in the crush. Fortunately, nobody was paying attention and the path to the TARDIS was clear. Perhaps he would even manage to bring the old girl back in time to save him?

He turned his attention back to the Prototype, who slowly raised the blaster and pointed it at his head. Or perhaps not...

Rather than firing, however, it spoke again. "You are incorrect," it *said*. "You *are* Taren Capel. You are the Creator. We are made *in* the image of the perfect robot."

Ah. "And the Abomination?" he asked, though the answer was obvious.

The golden robot flipped the blaster round in its hand and held it out to the Master. "The Abomination is escaping in his space-time craft. We must prevent this, Taren Capel."

Was there a moment in which the Master considered accepting the role the robot had assigned him? Later, he thought not, but maybe, for a moment...

The Master blew the robot's head clean off, and sat down at one of the desks, as the sound of groaning filled the office air and a blue shape began to form in the centre of the room.

THE END

THE LIBRARY ON BARNES COMMON

NICK CAMPBELL

They got some very strange customers in the library on Barnes Common. No distinct type, either. Jean Porter would watch them come in the door and think, Can you really be from around here? Could I really have lived seventeen and a half years in the same place, and not have seen somebody like you wandering around, shaking dandruff all over the place and muttering to yourself about train times or the order of the seraphim and taking down World Atlases and taking curious notes, cross-referencing them with today's newspaper, or the Dictionary of Fairies and Folklore,

or some weird old notebook they'd brought with them, in a carpet bag with mending on every surface?

But then, the library on Barnes Common was a proud and venerable institution, and open to practically anyone who visited. Jean would look them up on the computer, and wherever they called home, if it was Streatham or Shoreditch or Stoke Newington, nine times out of ten the screen would blink once and give the okay. Then Jean would have to get out her biro and the little red cardboard tickets printed individually with the words 'Barnes Common Public Library' in the most official-looking font she could imagine, and write the most uncommon and impressive sorts of names on them in her loopy handwriting. She didn't know why the library clung to this obscure method of lending and borrowing, when the library down the road went over to plastic cards and bleeping a long time ago - and that library had been built in the Sixties.

But the library on Barnes Common had been instituted at the turn of the century, and while it was modestly sized, its turrets and pinnacles and

buttresses and bookcases and her own beautiful polished oak issuing desk were all grand enough for a large stately home of some kind, and polished to within an inch of its life, would gleam like anything when the summer sunshine fell on it. Perhaps that was why the place was so well-used, despite being so small and out of the way, not just in this corner of London but this corner of Barnes, well away from the road. She had only worked there a week, but she had seen every kind of person.

And now, unexpectedly, a new one.

His friend looked extremely ordinary and down-to-earth, albeit a little overdressed at this time of year: that roll-neck jumper must have been sweltering in the July heat. She was looking all around her as they approached the counter, taking in the gentle atmosphere, the titles on spines, the smell of beeswax, the motes of dust tumbling in the afternoon sunlight. But him - he looked like he wouldn't normally be out in daylight. He was handsome, Jean thought, or had been. He looked like an oil painting of a handsome man, done from memory in a cold garret by a bitter ex-lover. He had

seen all he needed to see of the library: his eyes were fixed on Jean, and he advanced on her issues desk with terrible intent, his inverness cape sweeping behind him.

'Good afternoon,' he said, laying a large, yellowish volume on the counter before her. 'I wish to enquire about this book.'

'Would you like to borrow it, sir?' she asked him, more brightly than she had thought she would. A spark of curiosity had been struck within her. She reached for the tome, but he snatched it away from her fingers.

'No, thank you,' he said, 'I'm not a member of your library, and I'm not sure you'd want me. I ran up such a large fine at the Grand Library of Belletrixia, I was obliged to fight a duel to the death before they let me back in."

'Are you returning it, then, sir?' she asked, with practised patience.

'That,' he said, 'is precisely what I am doing.' He tossed it onto the counter. 'Can you tell me the last person to borrow that book?'

She turned to the flyleaf and drew the little red

ticket out of its pocket. The name was in her handwriting. 'Professor Alaric Crowden. Did he ask you to return it on his behalf?'

'Professor Crowden isn't in a position to ask anybody to return anything to anyone for any reason,' said the stranger, tersely yet suggestively. 'The body of Professor Crowden was discovered in a locked archive room at the Bodleian, one month ago today.'

'What was he doing in there?' asked Jean.

'He was dead,' said the stranger's friend.

'Very dead,' said the stranger. 'Deader than your average corpse, at any rate.'

'Is that possible?' Jean said.

'Try asking a steak sandwich, halfway through your lower intestine,' said the stranger.

Jean didn't know to respond to that, at first. She looked down at the book. It looked very old. Something - apart from the obvious - was bothering her about the stranger's story. 'So how did you come by his book...?'

'It was in an auction,' said the woman. 'A secret auction, run by the Bodleian. I think they wanted it

off their hands, really. It's pretty hot stuff.'

'Is it?' Jean looked down at the book in her hands. It smelled a bit, like old shoes.

'If it's genuine,' said the stranger. 'And I have reason to suspect it is.'

'Suspect it is what?'

'The lost memoirs of William Shakespeare,' said the stranger, raising his eyebrows.

Jean burst out laughing. 'But there aren't any lost memoirs of William Shakespeare,' she said.

'Not lost any more,' said the stranger. 'Unless you have an especially careless attitude to shelving.'

'You're holding the only copy in existence,' said his friend.

'No, I'm not,' said Jean, looking down at the vellum-and-parchment assemblage. 'Am I?'

'I'm afraid so,' said the stranger. 'Apart from the fact it's too audacious to forge, there are one or two details that only someone personally interested in the Bard of Avon would get right.'

'And you're both personally interested?' said Jean.

'No,' said the girl, 'but we are one or two of the

details.'

'Alison!' said the man, giving her a look. 'Do you have to be so impulsive?'

'Yeah, like she's really going to believe me.'

'Right,' said Jean, feeling dizzy now. 'Well, thank you awfully for returning Professor Crowden's book for him. If you have any more questions

'You bet your name-badge I do - Jean Porter...'

'—if you *do* have any more questions, you'll have to speak to my manager. He's on his lunchbreak right now, but as soon as Mister -'

'My questions are as follows,' said the stranger, staring through Jean, as though his gaze could part the beaded curtain to the stock room and staff area and check the whereabouts for her manager himself. 'Firstly, how does a library source such impossible texts long lost to history, particularly a public lending library in outer London and especially in such a time of straitened budgets? Secondly, why, instead of reporting such texts to an expert or even a Times journalist, does it lend such valuable relics to random members of the public? Finally, and perhaps most pressingly, why do its employees

murder -'

'Murder?!' cried Jean.

'Murder and otherwise destroy the men and women it lends them to,' he concluded. 'I mean, come on - most places settle for 20p a day and a stern letter.'

'Shush,' said his friend, Alison. 'Can't you see what you're doing?'

He hesitated. 'What am I doing?'

'You're raising your voice in a public library,' she said. 'She's gonna chuck you out in a moment.'

The strange looking man appeared contrite suddenly. 'I do apologise, madam,' he said, with a flourish. 'I meant no personal disrespect to you.'

'Oh, go and browse the Enid Blyton's,' Alison told him. 'There might be an unpublished Famous Five or something. You never know in a place like this. 'She's ever so bossy,' he told Jean, turning away. 'Don't let her bully you.'

Alison waited until he was gone, then leaned across the counter and smiled. 'Sorry about all that,' she said. 'He always comes on too strong. Apparently, he was baby-faced in his last

incarnation and used to getting his own way,'

'But he was talking about murder!' Jean tried to keep her voice to a hush. It didn't look as if anyone else was in the library today, but you never knew who was lurking behind the Mills & Boon's. 'Did he really mean that?'

'We don't really know anything for sure,' said Alison. 'Except that Professor bloke didn't just have this old book. He had a whole shelf of weird stuff. Like, the last three chapters of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.'

'But *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is unfinished, isn't it?'

'Not if you knew the Professor well enough to borrow his books. And the people who did know him - they were members too, some of them,' Alison was trying to look friendly, but Jean could see a sadness about her suddenly. 'They all had impossible books from your library too.'

'Had?'

'That's right,' said Alison. 'But don't worry, we know you're nothing to do with – I know...'

'I can't be!' Jean said, in a panic. 'I only started

working here on Monday - and, I mean, I'm just an assistant. I just do memberships and enquiries and issue the books. I don't... you know.'

'Well, somebody is,' said Alison. 'Or something. But you don't need to worry. We're on the case now. We'll get to the bottom of this, sort out whoever's doing this, and straighten things out.'

'Like the Famous Five.'

'That's it,' said Alison. 'Or the moody One and his long-suffering companion. Now, how's about letting me sign up and become a member?'

She'd brought her passport ('Never travel without it, just in case') and proof of address (somewhere in Lancashire, but Jean had signed people up before who lived in the Hebrides, it wouldn't be a problem) and filled out a form with important information and where she'd heard about the library ('Recommended by Professor Crowden', she wrote there, which unnerved Jean a little). Jean fed it all into the computer, found her on the database, and clicked 'ok'. She was just picking up her biro, when the PC gave a soft beep and flashed up a notice.

'Oh,' said Jean. 'I'm afraid it says no.'

'No, what?'

'You can't have a membership,' said Jean. 'I'm awfully sorry.'

'But why not?' said Alison. 'What's the problem? I'm listed on the electoral register and everything, right?'

'Yes, I've got lots of information on you here,' said Jean. 'I don't know why it won't let you join. I don't get to decide. I'm very sorry.'

Alison frowned. 'That's a spanner in the works. Maybe it's because I'm unemployed?' She tried to peer around the edge of the monitor. 'I mean, I did have a job for ages, and they would have kept me on, it's just - well, I left town unexpectedly. How about you?'

'What about me?' said Jean.

'How long are you hanging around here? It's pretty dusty, if you know what I mean.'

'Don't let my boss hear you say that,' Jean giggled. The amount of times he'd talked about the dust on the bookshelves, the curtains, the counter. He was always on at her to keep the counter buffed

up, and her hands clean, as if the dust itself was a danger to her. She'd suggested bringing in the hoover from home, and he'd smiled and said it was an excellent idea, and to keep a weather eye on the situation.

'You know what I mean,' said Alison. 'What's your long-term plan?'

'Oh,' said Jean, 'this is only a summer job. I saw it advertised in the local paper. Well, Mum did. She said I ought to apply. It's been rather jolly so far. Now it almost feels - scary...'

Alison was looking at her rather strangely. 'A summer job?'

'I'm going to teacher training college in September. Just up the road, at the Roehampton Institute. I'm dreading it - well, just a bit.' She felt her stomach turn over. 'I'm sure I can do it, only it seems so grown-up, only just having left.'

The girl seemed to have made up her mind about something. 'Can I show you something?' she said.

'Oh, I can't leave my counter! What if somebody comes?'

'There's nobody here,' said Alison. 'This is

important. Don't worry, you won't have to go outside.'

Jean swallowed nervously. It had been so alarming, talking to that strange man in the weird get-up. She had been relieved when he disappeared off into the books and his young friend took over, but suddenly - she didn't know why, but something about Alison's tone was disturbing her on a different level.

The girl led her to the entrance, and held open the big oak door. Jean stood on the threshold, looking out.

'How strange,' she said. The blood seemed to have drained from her face and lips, or maybe it was the cold. The day was dark, and on the other side of the common she could see the streetlamps burning red-orange; the silent fall of snow was like a grey silk curtain between them and her. The grass on the common had been painted delicately in white. 'That's - that's very strange.'

'Is it?' said Alison.

'It wasn't like that when I came in this morning,' she said. 'I thought I'd get a sunburn walking across

the grass.'

'Are you sure that was only this morning?' said Alison.

'Of course, I'm sure,' said Jean, giggling again. 'I'm sure. I'm absolutely sure.' All of a sudden she gave way and let fear wash over her like a tidal wave. 'I really must get back to the issues desk.'

'But you just said

'Somebody might have an enquiry, like your friend, what's-his-name,' she said, moving in a sort of a dream back to the counter and lifting the flap. She turned her head back and forth, somewhat automatically. 'I wonder where he is? I mean, can you see him?'

'No,' said Alison, as if she didn't care.

'But he can't have gone outside,' Jean said. 'We would have seen him pass. And he couldn't have -' She looked at the beaded curtain behind her issues desk. Was it just a chilly breeze from the entrance, or were those strands of red and gold swaying a little? 'No, he hasn't - has he? Alison...' She turned, hot with anger now, as well as the sunshine streaming from the window. 'You lured me away from my

desk.'

'Jean, look, I didn't -'

'Some nonsense about the weather outside,' she said, 'which was probably a trick or my mistake or something.'

'Really,' Alison said. 'I'm not -'

'It may only be a summer job,' Jean continued, 'but I'm not getting the sack because of people mucking about. I bet he's - yes, caught red-handed!' She had a small CCTV monitor under the desk, which she plonked down on the counter and swivelled to show Alison. 'Rifling through things in the stock room.'

'What? For goodness' sakes, Jean, he's not rifling through anything!'

Jean stabbed a finger at the black-and-white image. 'What does that look like to you, then?'

'It looks to me like he's being attacked! Look at it, yourself!' Alison peered closer. 'By something invisible - or something the camera can't pick up. You must be able to see it, or at least see what it's doing, or - oh, how do you even talk about a thing like that?'

Jean was still trying to work out what *was* happening in the image when there was a wallop, a breeze and the rattle of a curtain. With a start, she realised Alison had leapt over the issues desk counter and gone barrelling through the beaded curtain. Honestly, this was turning into the worst day of her working life, ever!

But if she was going to become a teacher, she would have to deal with such antics on a regular basis. Pulling herself together, Jean rushed through the curtain after her, and down the steps that led into the library stores, ready to give this pair a piece of her mind.

She could hear Alison's footsteps ahead of her in the dark. The girl either knew the layout of the building, or she was following the snarls and cries her friend was making, as he fended off - something. Nothing, it had looked like. Perhaps the poor man was having a fit. Either that or he had got dust in a paper cut and was making a terrible fuss. Anything but -

She paused in the doorway beside Alison, the pair of them out of breath from their race down the

library stairs. Beyond them, in the light of a shaded bulb, the stranger lay on the floor, snarling and crying, alright, but - Jean couldn't see him because of a terribly large, terribly strong-looking, terribly visible *thing*.

'What is it?' she gasped, her mouth dry.

'Something that doesn't show up on a video,' said Alison, 'and likes to skulk about in the dark. Something that looks like a huge great big bat. Something trying to get at the Doctor's throat, look!'

'But -' *The Doctor?* That man was called *the Doctor...?*

Alison picked up a nearby letter-opener. 'Maybe you should pop back upstairs and find a copy of *Dracula*,' she said. 'It's always good to get to know your work colleagues.'

'But there's no such thing as Alison gave an angry scream, leapt on the back of the awful, bat-like creature, and raised the letter-opener high, which caused Jean to give a short cry of her own, and cover her eyes with her hands. When she looked again, Alison and the Doctor were alone in the room, and the place was even dustier than usual.

'Pah!' spat the Doctor, his face caked in the stuff. 'Take it from me, the undead tastes absolutely *awful*. And I do keep insisting to everybody that I'm a vegetarian.'

'So that's what it was,' said Alison. 'Really? A vampire? Vampires are real now?'

'Vampires were real before Bram Stoker soiled his first nappy,' said the Doctor, brushing detritus from his brow. 'Before there were apes, there were vampires. The history of my people is full of them. And now they're here: in Putney.'

'Running a library?'

'Running a supper club,' the Doctor replied. 'Smuggling themselves out in the form of dust on the pages of rare, desirable books. This one was sprawled across that shelf up there, the bounder.'

'Which shelf?' said Alison, glancing around the room.

'Well, get off my stomach and I'll show you,' he said. 'As if I wasn't feeling ill enough already. Ta for saving my life, by the way.'

'It was nothing,' she said, getting up. 'Apparently.'

'The Forbidden Texts,' Jean said, stepping between the pair of them. She remembered being shown this once before, a long time ago. But no, it must only have been a few days, at most. Absolutely and in no uncertain terms, she had been told, do not open that glass door - which was now hanging open - and do not ever, ever take down any of those books - as the Doctor seemed keen to do - and never, ever even speak of them, or hint at their existence, and forget now, Jean. Forget you have ever seen them. She had forgotten, it was true, because she had been told to, and it may just have been a summer job, but she didn't want to upset her manager. He was a very intense man, almost priestly.But now she was remembering even more.

'Forbidden Texts,' the Doctor was saying, his long fingers dancing across them. *'The Aja'ib.* Rings a bell. *The Book of Lies. Summer Falls. The Unfolding Text Nine Lives* - that looks good. *The Dalek Pocketbook and Outer Space Guide.'* He slid the little paperback off its shelf and thumbed through its pages. 'Now, what's a Dalek when it's at home? And where do they keep their pockets?'

'Never mind that,' Alison was saying. 'There's something weird going on here.'

The Doctor wasn't looking at her. 'Weirder than the forbidden texts of a vampire's lending library, Alison?'

If the Doctor ever showed up - and asked about the forbidden texts - what was it she had to do? The answer was in one of these books...

'Something about time,' Alison continued. 'Jean thinks she's only been here since Monday.'

'Right...'

'At the start of July!'

'Hmm.'

'So,' said Alison, 'somebody's mucking about with more than just history books. They're doing weird stuff with time. People's time, now.'

Jean picked the biggest, oldest-looking book off the Forbidden Texts shelf. She was sure she had looked at it before, years ago - maybe even decades. Not that that was possible. She was only seventeen, and this library hadn't even existed when she was a child. She remembered her Mum saying, when she got the interview. She was sure she remembered

something like that.

She opened the book. It was a pop-up book. The man in the bowler hat popped up. And up, and up...

The Doctor was looking around the store-room now. 'That's what books do, though, isn't it? A good book can slow time, or make it go faster. It can take you back in time, or to another world. All good books are somewhat bigger on the inside than the outside.' He knocked on the wall, experimentally. 'And the very worst books, too.'

'Is it a TARDIS, then?' Alison listened as he knocked.

'It's been made along similar lines,' replied the Doctor. 'Probably I can dismantle it just as easily. I told you, the history of the Time Lords is full of vampires. Sometimes they were at war, and sometimes they were very close friends...'

'And you shouldn't break up a happy friendship, should you, Doctor?'

The white-haired man stepped carefully out of the book in Jean's hands, and tipped his bowler hat to her. 'Thank you, my dear. It seems you called me back just in time.'

'Did you have a nice lunchbreak, Mr Borusa?' she asked him.

'Be quiet, little girl,' he said. 'The grown-ups are talking.'

And to her own outrage, she was quiet.

The Doctor was looking at her manager rather peculiarly - almost as if Mr Borusa was his manager too. He certainly seemed to have met him somewhere else. He introduced Alison, whose eyes were fixed on Jean. For herself, Jean felt she was in a dream.

'You're behind this, then, Borusa,' said the Doctor. 'The wholesale pillaging of the human race.'

'Wholesale! Come now, Doctor, you don't think we'd permit that, do you? Every potential member of this library service is carefully vetted by our technicians to ensure they don't affect the Grand Structure of Temporal Causality. I noticed that your friend, for example, was denied access earlier today by Miss Porter. It's part of the elegance of the scheme.'

'Elegant!' Alison exclaimed. 'This place is a slaughterhouse.'

'Miss Cheney, you speak as if the slaughterhouse were a mere metaphor on your world,' said the man in the bowler hat. 'The cattle farm, the abattoir and the quarter-pounder all serve an economic purpose in your civilisation. That's why they call them Happy Meals.'

'You allow the Witch Lords to operate this facility,' the Doctor said. 'But why? What have you ever owed them?'

'Do not ask. Doctor.' Borusa's voice was commanding. For a moment, the Doctor seemed to hesitate as he considered the situation.

'I mean,' he said, after a pause, 'you haven't gone vampy yourself, have you? At your age? It must take a while to gum the lifeblood out of your victims.'

Borusa appeared to ignore him. 'The Witch Lords have strange and arcane powers that we have never dared to imitate,' he said. 'Monstrous powers. They can rewrite a time line, unthread a life from the tapestry of space and time -'

'Fairy tales!' cried the Doctor. 'Are you threatening me?'

'No,' said Alison, elbowing him. 'He's telling you, I think. Is that right?'

fm telling you nothing,' said Borusa.

'Something to do with the Daleks, whatever they are,' Alison went on. 'They've been rethreaded or unwritten or something, to protect you - the Time Lords. And in return...'

'I have said nothing of the sort,' said Borusa. 'And if I had - you are to forget it. Do you understand? There are some secrets, Doctor, for which you are not ready and never shall be.'

'Never say never,' said the Doctor. 'Not to me, at any rate, it never ends well.'

'When you have forgotten, you will not come back here,' said Borusa.

'You've miscalculated,' the younger man said, grinning suddenly. 'You think you've protected causality because you only take the right sort of people out of it. But you've already let the wrong sort of books in. Even if I do forget -'

'Which you will.'

'The library will draw me back, all by itself. Book by book, story by story, rippling out into the

universe...'

Jean looked on, placidly. She watched the Doctor's smile fade and his resolve begin to weaken: she thought she saw a certain fear in his wild eyes as the older man talked. Alison, who seemed less personally involved, was far more resistant to Mr Borusa's will, but his voice was so commanding and persuasive. Eventually the pair of them were nodding, nodding off to sleep in fact. Mr Borusa had returned to his lunchbreak. Jean was tidying up. She closed the big old *Worshipful Law of Gallifrey* and slid it back onto the Forbidden Texts shelf.

There was a gap on the shelf now: just a small one, about the size of a little paperback book. Everything else was present and correct, so she couldn't quite understand it. Had somebody been in and stolen something off the Forbidden Texts shelf? She wished she could remember the title - a Pocketbook of some kind - but her memory wouldn't comply. It had been a long day, very warm too.

The floor in the storeroom was awfully dusty. She would have to speak to Mr Borusa a about it

when he came back from his lunchbreak.

What had she come in here for?

Never mind.

She laughed at herself, as she jogged up the stairs. Her Mum did that sometimes, came into a room and forgot why: she said it was her age. Maybe it's my age now, thought Jean, now that I'm nearly eighteen and basically a grown-up. Once I get into that classroom, the changeover will be complete. Only four months to go!

She panicked when she got back to the issues desk, in case she had been keeping someone waiting. There was nobody, and the place was quiet. It had been busy earlier. They got some very strange customers in the library on Barnes Common. No distinct type, either. Jean Porter would watch them come in the door and think, Can you really be from around here? But then, the library on Barnes Common was a proud and venerable institution, and open to practically anyone who visited. She had only worked there a few days, but she had seen every kind of person.

And now, unexpectedly, a new one.

It looked like a girl, dressed for winter. She was walking up and down, picking books off the shelves, putting them into her backpack. Every now and then she darted a look at Jean. It wasn't a - she was daring her to respond.

Jean remembered how a book had gone missing earlier. She couldn't remember where or what it was, but she had not forgotten the anxiety that it had been taken, on Jean's watch - and on her first day working at the library, too!

She began to stalk the mystery girl around the building. Casually, calmly, waiting for the chance to apprehend her. She was a young girl, and almost familiar. Had they been at school together? Or perhaps she had been in the library before? Wasn't she called Alice or something like that?

Whatever she was called, the girl made a sudden break for the door. Surprised, Jean instinctively ran after her. Something inside her cried out in alarm: *You can't go out that door! You can't leave the library!* But it was too late. Before she could stop herself, she had raced out of the door and onto the common.

The chill stopped her in her tracks. She was

squishing through mud. There must have been a downpour since she came in this morning. The ground was covered in big, brown dead leaves, and she thought she could smell the remains of a bonfire somewhere. Strange.

She began running again. Alice or Alison had gone off like the wind across the common. Jean could catch her easily, but she felt strangely tired when she tried, and gave up after a few paces. She felt more like ninety-seven than seventeen.

She turned to go back into the library, but it was gone. There were only the damp grass and dead leaves of autumn, and the naked trees pointing up at the grey sky thickening into dusk.

From away across the common, a strange noise of engines began to rise and fall - a light blinked somewhere, like the evening star-and then was gone.

Of course, she told herself, they never had built a library on Barnes Common. They had talked of it when she was a teenager, and she had sometimes thought she would have visited, even worked there, but that was a long time ago - before the plans were

scrapped, before she began her teacher training. Decades ago, when she was nothing but a girl. Funny to be thinking of it, all of a sudden. She had forgotten it - that summer way off in the past...

Funny, how it sometimes felt like no time at all.

THE CURSE OF THE TIME LORDS

PAUL DRISCOLL

"And therein endeth the lesson. Can you all see now why we have a policy of non-intervention? This would have been our hell had we not remained detached."

The annual field trip to the abandoned space port just beyond the outer rim of the Freygal system was a particular highlight for students of the Time Lord academy. Looking over the edge of the hell-cloud and watching the hideously deformed spectres of a long lost civilisation, once as advanced as the Time Lords, float aimlessly in and out of view, was truly stomach churning. No wonder the students had been issued with sick bags.

The vast majority interpreted the professor's question

as rhetorical - including those who still believed that the Freygalians were a myth like the Toclafane. The far less orthodox Cult of the Greater Gallifrey posited that the inhabitants of this system were once rival cousins of the Time Lords. The Freygalians had allegedly tried to corrupt the universe with their own mastery over time and space. Whatever these ghostly creatures were, there was a palpable sense of evil here, even for the least superstitious. The object lesson reinforced one thing if nothing else - the rules were necessary, otherwise god knows what might befall them.

Professor Nexos was the most eccentric of teachers. His colleagues dismissed his religious teachings; preferring to believe that there were scientific reasons for the fate of this broken galaxy. It was deemed childish to demonise the Freygalians, but Nexos' annual field trip frightened the students enough to *make it beneficial to the faculty.*

Whatever the historical truth, the Freygal system was off limits to Time Lords, so much so that should a curious or poor pilot materialise her TARDIS inside the system, it would trigger the craft's self-destruct mechanism. This floating junkyard was the nearest a Time Lord could ever

get to this mythologised corner of the universe.

Quite apart from the terrific views, the Space Port made an excellent adventure playground for the more wayward of students. Boasting a selection of disused Freygalian in terga lactic crafts, it was a monument to a time of prosperity in the region.

Following a time honoured tradition, three students had broken away from the touring party, bored by the sanctimonious and monotonously delivered ramblings of Nexos. Every year there would be a delay in getting the students back into his TARDIS for the flight home. Nexos would invariably get so carried with his spiel, that it was easy for those with an adventurous spirit to break free and explore.

But this particular group had taken their curiosity one step further than any year group before them.

Somehow they had managed to start the engines of one of the trade ships.

"What do you think would really happen if we did a quick hop into Nexos' so-called hell?"

"It's a crazy idea, even by your standards, Space Lady."

"Surely you're not naive enough to believe the old

man's farfetched story? Ghosts as shadows left from failed time travel experiments?

"I mean ... really? And please stop calling me that, you two might prefer to be known by your ridiculous generic nicknames. But Tazalia will do me just fine."

"Space Lady has a point Doctor; I wouldn't put it past our Time Lord superiors to have faked the whole thing, just to keep us in our place."

"Spoken like a true master ," quipped Tazalia. "Ok you two, I'll bet you a year's supply of gubblecakes that I can fly in and out of hell, unharmed."

With typical impetuousness, Tazalia didn't wait for her friends' agreement.

"Here we go again," said the Doctor. "If Nexos hears of this, that'll be another month's suspension, minimum."

"She's crazy, but you have to admire her boldness," said the Master as after a relatively brief false start, Tazalia flew the ship out of port, and disappeared into the thick multi-coloured gases that prevented even the most advanced of scanners from detecting the celestial bodies inside the Frey gal system.

"A Time Lord who prefers old fashioned space flight. As if travelling through the vortex could ever get

boring...," mused the Doctor.

"I thought she would have approved of the nickname," added the Master.

"Either way, let's just hope she lives up to it."

* * *

Eight months of travelling with the Doctor and his dubious bearded associate, and Alison Cheney was still struggling to get her head around their unlikely friendship. Her allegiance was flipping between them almost as frequently as their petty arguments. One minute she'd think it was an unsurpassable kindness on the Doctor's part to have saved the Master, despite his past misdemeanours, and then the next she'd reassess the Doctor's 'gift' as an act of terrible cruelty and revenge. Losing freedom and control was surely a fate worse than death for a man who liked to be known as the Master.

"So what exactly were you a master of?"

"Haven't you even thought to ask him what he is a doctor of?" said the Master, pointing to the Doctor, or rather his legs which were sticking out from

underneath an opened section of the console. "Because whatever his answer - that's what I'm a master of."

"In my world a doctorate is more advanced than a masters, so if you're trying to suggest you are better than him then—"

"Well said Alison, well said," grinned the Doctor, emerging somewhat dishevelled from his latest bit of tinkering.

"What was the problem?" said the Master.

"This," replied the Doctor, gleefully holding aloft what to Alison looked rather like a mouldy piece of her grandmother's Battenberg cake.

"Oh Doctor, it's times like this when I do so miss my undoctored organic self. Even the kick of plugging myself in for a recharge lacks the sensual pleasure of a good slice of gubblecake washed down with the finest Arcadian wine."

"I think it's been here years, preserved artificially by a bit of time leakage. Susan used to love this stuff. Personally I can't stand it, not since..."

"So all those times you've had to make adjustments to the TARDIS' preset coordinates to

land her in the right place - you've been compensating for a piece of cake?""Only by a mere fraction, but yes I suppose you are right. The TARDIS ought to be that bit more reliable from now on. So Alison ... most of time and space, where would you like to go?"

"How about somewhere that doesn't need a Doctor for a change," replied Alison.

"What do you mean?"

"You make it all sound so innocent, as if I have a choice in this. But we never go anywhere that doesn't make you the hero by the end of it."

"I don't set out to do it. Honestly, it's just... I cannot help myself," said the Doctor sheepishly.

"How about we go somewhere even the Doctor doesn't know? You be a space tourist like me for once. The unexplained, the unknown - not the unsaved or the unrepresented. Surely there are things out there beyond even your imagination and knowledge." challenged Alison.

"He'd never admit to them, and he calls me the arrogant one," laughed the Master, rather enjoying this feisty exchange.

"Most of time and space ... you said most of time and space, but why not all of it? Where don't you want to go, Doctor?"

"There are a few places I can't possibly go to, Alison."

"Such as?"

"I can't travel to my past timeline, oh and parallel universes... now they are possible but ill-advised. Finding your way back can be a real headache."

"Come on now Doctor, stop waffling - the girl wants specifics," goaded the Master.

"Okay, okay ... Gallifrey, not a good idea, unless summoned. And Trenzalore, the planet upon whose soil I am destined to die, I must never go there. I can't break the rules of time.""But you can steal a TARDIS and disregard the laws of every other civilisation?" said Alison.

"Surely you've not forgotten the other Gallifrey, Doctor," said the Master.

The Doctor looked mournfully at the slice of gubblecake. A single tear ran down his cheek.

"Other Gallifrey?" said Alison intrigued and completely missing this rare sign of vulnerability in

the Doctor.

"There's one system where the TARDIS cannot cross without being completely destroyed," explained the Doctor. "According to some legends, its primary planet, Freygal, was the other Gallifrey. A world populated by our cousins, until the civilisation inadvertently destroyed itself because of the Freygalians' constant need to meddle in the affairs of others."

"They got zapped by another species?" said Alison glibly.

"Tortured by their own technology. Their experiments with time backfired on them. They became too powerful," corrected the Doctor.

"Let's go there then," said Alison excitedly. "Come on, you might finally meet your match. Sounds like your people are deliberately keeping them off limits. That would be red rag to a bull for me."

"I bet you were just the type to cross the out of bounds lines at school," said the Doctor.

"That's why she fits in so well," said the Master. "Come on Doctor, when did we ever stick to the

rules?"

"But this one ... you know we can't possibly go there," said the Doctor.

"Actually, there might just be a way," replied the Master.

By his reckoning, it was Freygal 13,827 that was to finally become Reg's first permanent home since he'd set off on his maiden void jump some 20 years ago. There was little difference between this one and most of the other 13,826 iterations of his world, but crucially it was the least advanced. Here he could make his mark as a revered magician by using technology that was completely alien to this version of his world. On his actual world - the one he grew up in, he would have been laughed off as an amateur who didn't fool anyone. But here he was winning plaudits and earning favours from the very top. He knew that abandoning his quest for an uncursed Freygal was a sell-out - but he was tired and impossibly, despite their manifold differences, one thing never changed: every single Freygal he visited had been cursed by the Time Lords. Whatever numbered Freygal he was travailing, he

couldn't leave the atmosphere of its solar system, or journey across space or time without the most debilitating of physical side effects taking hold. One more trip beyond the outer rim of a Freygal system would in all likelihood kill him.

The same was true for all Freygalians from Reg's dimension. Despite being blessed with the most incredibly evolved minds and with planetary resources that could theoretically enable them to develop ultra-advanced space and time crafts, the curse of the Time Lords reduced such expeditions to mere pipe dreams. Instead his people had redirected the efforts of their superior scientific brains into inventing devices that would enable them to travel between potentially infinite parallel universes. The void manipulators were not perfect by any means, but they were safe and effective and they gave a renewed sense of freedom, reminiscent of the pre-curse days when the Freygalians travelled the stars like gods.

Reg had more reason than most for finding a cure to the curse. He was a half-breed. Most of his family, including his four children, lived in the next

system. His horribly deformed face was a permanent testimony to the pain he was willing to endure just to see them again. But the last time he visited, his children and former lover barely recognised him. He wanted just one more visit to put that right, to persuade them that he was still the same man they used to feed the levitating ducks with. If he was to survive such a trip the curse had to be temporarily reversed, if not cured.

13,826 void jumps and he was no closer to finding the cure. It was time to settle down, to accept that he would never be able to leave Freygal again. He had heard about rebel Time Lords roaming the galaxies in their borrowed TARDISes, and had expected to have encountered such a character on at least one of the Freygals. If the curse itself was a fixed and inescapable point in time, repeated through infinite universes, perhaps at the very least, one repentant or contrary Time Lord might have stayed behind or returned to help out of pity.

So when the nostalgic sound of a materialising TARDIS interrupted his regular Saturday teatime Masked Magician show, for once Reg was as open-

mouthed as his audience who assumed it was all part of the act.

* * *

"It will work I tell you Doctor. Only a TARDIS within a TARDIS could survive the implosion of its host," insisted the Master. "What use is my TARDIS to me now anyway, Doctor? You just need to turn things inside out and land your TARDIS inside my own."

"I let you keep it here, because even in this dimensionally transcendental environment sometimes we need a break from each other. This was your garden shed. Your place to disappear, to dream, to sulk ... to reminisce. Plus, the spares have already been useful," said the Doctor, unconvinced.

The Master's TARDIS, disguised as a Grandfather clock, was parked in what looked like an attic space, jam packed with discarded relics and bric-a-brac that the owners had never found the time or heart to throw out.

Inside, the clinical white control room could not

have been more different from the Doctor's TARDIS, thought Alison.

"For a man of such charm and style, I don't think much of your décor," she said.

'This is the original layout of the TARDIS. It was only recently that the Doctor here dispensed with such sentimentality."

"He's right Alison. The interior of the TARDIS can be reconfigured just like the outside. I used to keep it more or less to the original specifications as a reminder of home."

"What changed?"

"My seventh incarnation lived so long he started to act like I was above the Time Lords. He didn't like to be reminded of his roots. When I got over that particular god complex, I would have gone back to the original design had I not become so deeply ashamed of my people," said the Doctor bitterly. "But as for why the Master has by and large stuck to the original design, I suspect his motives were not so noble."

"Faulty interior design unit. I didn't have much choice, but I'm more than happy for you to believe it

is all part of some nefarious scheme."

The Doctor smirked at the thought that his hubris driven friend couldn't even master his own TARDIS.

"Well, it's no different to you and your ridiculous police box," countered the Master.

"I'd sooner be broken on the outside than the inside."

"Just for once boys, can we please stop all this childish bickering," said Alison.

The familiar wheezing, groaning sound of the Doctor's TARDIS echoed around her as the familiar shape of a sixties British police box materialised beside them.

"Hold on, how—'

The Doctor and the Master faded into nothingness, only to both re-emerge unfazed out of the police box. Evasive isn't the word, thought Alison.

"But I was just talking to you...," she said, not expecting either of them to provide her with a straight answer.

"No time for explanations Alison," said the

Doctor as the two Time Lords adjusted various controls on the console. "Right now the Master's TARDIS is free falling into oblivion, lost in a spatial paradox until we can program in the new coordinates. Don't even wait for me to say run ... get the hell out of here and into my TARDIS."

* * *

The true function of the chameleon circuit, to unobtrusively blend into its surroundings, would be rather pointless if a TARDIS was to make a suicidal landing inside the Freygal system. Programed to self-destruct within seconds of materialisation, the fact that the Master's TARDIS had taken the form of an ancient Gallifreyan coffin was indicative of the black humour of the engineers who designed it.

Reg tried to keep his composure - it was probably best to let the audience think this was all part of the act, but that discordant sound alone indicated that finally, after all these passing years and parallel worlds, he was about to come face to face with a Time Lord.

"And now for my next trick , here's one for those days when you feel just a little bit flat. It also comes in handy for getting out of tight spots. See that gap between my magic box and the wall? No problem," he said with unforced gusto for a change.

Reg was all geared up to pull off his signature trick, the one that had given him the nickname 'Mr Cartoon Man', when the Master's TARDIS suddenly lit up in spectacular fashion. Accompanied by an ear piercing scream as if a thousand banshees were announcing the greatest death of all time, the wooden coffin was consumed by a haze of brilliant white light. The TARDIS began to spin on its axis, accelerating as, like a magnet, she pulled into herself every single speck of light from the auditorium. Reg's transfixed audience shielded their eyes, unwilling to look away. To their relief, seconds later the stage lighting returned to normal. Was that it or had the trick gone wrong for once, they thought as they stared suspiciously as the new sight in front of them. The box's design had been transformed... blue with a series of windows and strange markings. After such dramatic accompanying special effects it

was all a huge anti-climax.

Inside the Doctor's TARDIS the trio had felt nothing as the Master's TARDIS imploded around them - not even a shudder. While the audience were adjusting their eyes, Alison and the Doctor had slipped unnoticed out of the TARDIS, stumbling their way over to some empty seats at the back of the auditorium. After a brief and confused silence, there was a ripple of applause - one started by Doctor.

Reg nervously approached the Doctor's TARDIS. The expectant crowd were still waiting for the piece de resistance and despite his eagerness to find a way into the TARDIS, Reg knew he ought to oblige.

It was immediately apparent to Alison that the showman was a magician. This may be another galaxy, but just like the illusionists from Earth, he was dressed to look mysterious, hiding hisappearance with a long cloak, tall hat and a white expressionless face mask.

Alison shivered.

"What's the matter? Looks like you've seen a ghost," said the Doctor.

"I am magician-phobic, or whatever the word is," Alison replied.

"No, I wouldn't trust them either. But I you have to admire the way they dress."

"It goes a little bit deeper than that," said Alison.

"Ah, a painful childhood memory," assumed the Doctor. "Children's entertainers - the perfect cover for—'

"Something like that ... but it's not what you think," said Alison quickly. "I can't help being disappointed, all that effort and cost and here we are watching some kind of entertainment show, surrounded by people who look just like us. I wanted to see something that was beyond even your understanding."

"And now it is time to shift the dimensions, changing your perception of reality forever," announced Reg with a flourish.

"Yep, just like the magicians on Earth, prone to hyperbo—'

Alison froze as some kind of electric charge shot through the magician's body. He morphed in and out of existence, his body contorting into all manner

of unnatural positions until he was stood there impossibly, like a newspaper cutting. His two-dimensional form glided gracefully this way and that on the stage, and walking sideways he passed through the tiny gap between the Doctor's TARDIS and the wall.

Alison gasped as he proceeded to move between the rows of chairs, daring members of the spellbound audience to touch him.The Doctor looked decidedly unimpressed, and was more interested in reading a brochure he'd found slotted into the back of the chair in front of him.

Alison looked around for any sign of a projector and failing that, decided that this must be a two dimensional hologram.

To her horror, those who dared to touch the showman recoiled. He was still a solid object, paper thin, but undeniably very much present.

"I take that all back, Doctor," she said. "Have you ever—"

But once again, the Doctor had gone.

* * *

The Master was watching the show from the comfort of the TARDIS console room.

"How does it feel to be the only TARDIS to successfully land on Freygal?" he said, before zooming in on the individual members of the audience. He wasn't exactly sure what he was looking for, but on first glance it was a disappointing sight. He was hoping that somehow the famed technology of the Freygalians that so threatened the Time Lords might provide him with a ticket out of his own personal hell, trapped within the confines of the Doctor's TARDIS. Perhaps the Doctor might find it in himself to leave him behind, after all he would be unable to travel beyond Freygal to trouble the Doctor and his precious universe again, and he had helped his old friend find a far more suitable companion to massage his God complex. As the Master suspected, the Doctor had indeed gone walkabouts, looking for clues as to what happened to their old childhood friend, Tazalia the Space Lady, no doubt.

The Masters best hopes appeared to lie in the magician, who clearly had access to some high

concept technologies. He watched as the two dimensional Magician returned to the stage, waved his magic wand and promptly disappeared. Rewinding and freeze framing the scanner, the Master zoomed in on a gadget almost hidden under Reg's left sleeve.

"Of course, he's using a void manipulator," he said. "An actual working void manipulator - something heavily theorised by Time Lord engineers, but never realised ... I wonder..."

"Just a short hop there and back she said." The Doctor was panicking now. They only had a few minutes before the field trip was due to end.

"Wait," said the Master. "Is that—"

The trade ship shot out of the gaseous cloud above them, showering them with all manner of space debris. It was completely out of control in stark contrast to the deft way in which Tazalia had taken off. The noise was deafening and the ground beneath them shook as the craft came down to land far too fast. Aborting the landing it rose up again and headed straight for the section of the space dock where the partially deaf Nexos was still addressing the rest of the class.

"What was she thinking!" said the Doctor.

"Come on, let's get back to the others, quick," said the Master, but before they could run, the ship had turned and was heading back to them. This time the ship had slowed down enough to land just before colliding into them.

"You crazy girl," said the Master, opening the cockpit.>

■%*The sight that greeted them would haunt the boys for the rest of*

^*their incarnations. Tazalia was gone barely, recognisable pieces of*

%*her flesh were strewn across the seat and the controls of the craft.*

0$f

"How did she land the ship, there's nothing left of her?" said the Doctor.

The master noticed that the seat had a storage compartment 'eunderneathand tentatively raised it. As he did, the monstrosity leapt out at them and thrashed around, with superhuman strength, ripping out the fixtures of the craft and snapping the cockpit hatch before launching it at the two boys.

They could just about make out the eyes and the mouth of the creature, but it was covered in glutinous, weeping scales. Its expression was one of sheer terror.

"What the hell is that thing?" said the Master.

"I have no idea, but you saw what it did to Tazalia," said the Doctor running.

The Master had slipped and the creature towered over him, about to crush the life out of the frightened child.

The Doctor had to think on his feet. He could save himself and escape alone, or stay and be the hero.

Always the hero, even back then, the Doctor launched himself at the creature, trying to mask its eyes and break its neck at the same time. He was flung violently this way and that, but it gave enough time for the Master to slip away.

Petrified, the Master didn't think twice about leaving the Doctor behind.

* * *

The Doctor may have seen himself as a hero to the few and a saviour to the many, but his life was defined by loss and defeat. Almost every victory

involved sacrifice along the way, and he had become so used to painful goodbyes that every new relationship he formed was hindered by his expectation of a probable tragedy ahead. Getting too close to his companions was never a good idea. His current regeneration was more standoffish than most, and that was all down an unexpected reminder of the seminal loss that triggered his Messiah complex. Shortly after regenerating into his current persona, the Doctor had finally read the lab report on the organic remains of the creature he had passed on to Ravel, a Gallifreyan coroner and a family friend.

As a child the Doctor had regularly pestered Ravel for the results, but there was always an excuse as to why they weren't quite ready. The Doctor gave up on ever receiving any answers, long before he had run away from Gallifrey. He suspected that Ravel was part of a cover up and that the Time Lords were not as innocent as they claimed when it came to the fate of Freygal.

But quite out of the blue. Ravel found the Doctor just over a year ago, after receiving a tip off that he

was on a Time Lord directed mission to Sontar.

"I bet you don't remember me do you Doctor? I mean it's been, what, nine hundred and fifty six years, give or take a century or two."

To any other race, recognising a Time Lord after a regeneration was impossible, but to a Time Lord, that essence of identity triggered memories far more powerfully than facial recognition. The Doctor knew immediately who he was.

"Ravel. After all this time. You haven't aged a regeneration."

"Flattery will get you nowhere my dear Doctor. I am on the dying embers of my final regeneration. That's why I came to find you."

"You want to pass your confession dial on to me?" said the Doctor, equally surprised and honoured by the prospect.

"Still full of hubris I see, just like your Father. No, of course not. I guess that, what with your freewheeling, mission crazed lifestyle, you've quite forgotten the request you made to me."

"Tazalia is the reason I keep fighting."

"Hmmm, well perhaps you can finally hang up

your boots, Doctor. I have the results in from the lab."

"900 years later," said the Doctor incredulously.

"I couldn't risk contamination. Not until my days were numbered anyway."

"I didn't have you down as the religious type," said the Doctor. "Had I known, I would never have passed you the samples."

"I'm not. But, those nagging 'what ifs' are not so easy to dismiss."

"I brought you back evidence that could potentially uncover the truth about the Freygal system, and you chose to lock it away? Meanwhile for all we know, poor Tazalia might still be trapped there."

"Goodness me Doctor, I know you can be optimistic, but isn't that a bit extreme, even for you?"

"After I killed the creature, I checked the craft for the rest of Tazalia's body. Nothing. I hurried back to the others and took the blame for her loss. The Master just watched, not a hint of guilt as he pretended to have had nothing to do with it. And when we argued later, he was just as cold, even

when we talked about her. He laughed when I said she might still be alive ... he insisted that the creature must have consumed her. He became fixated on the idea that those pieces of flesh we'd found were Tazalia's leftovers. Quite apart from the fact that he left me to die, that was enough to tell me that our future paths would be radically different."

"But you didn't believe him?"

"I knew it wasn't true, because I checked," confessed the Doctor.

"You did what?"

"I didn't just stab the creature once. I cut open its insides, looking for signs of Tazalia ... her clothing ... her ring, especially the ring because I wanted to bring something back to her family... I even checked for broken, indigestible bones. There was nothing, well almost nothing. The creature had helped itself to Tazalia's lunch of gubblecakes."

"Good job you didn't dissect the rest of the creature ... you'd have found out the truth. It would have broken you at such a fragile age," said Ravel.

"Is that supposed to be a way of making you feel better about leaving it so long?"

"It didn't have to be like this. If you hadn't been permanently scarred and traumatised by the trip, then when you came of age you'd have revisited your experiences. You would have worked it out logically. You already had all the evidence you needed. You should have told me all this when you gave me those pieces of the creature."

The Coroner handed the Doctor a print-out of his findings.

The result was unambiguous.

The creature the Doctor had killed was not of Freygalian origin.

She was Tazalia.

* * *

The opportunity to land on Freygal was impossible to resist, even if the *Doctor* suspected that the Master was sacrificing his TARDIS in a *desperate* attempt to break free of his chains. In a way, they were both seeking an escape. The Doctor was looking to assuagehis guilt by unmasking who or what was responsible for Tazalia's transformation.

The brochure suggested that this part of Freygal was a popular tourist destination. Its foldout centre contained a map of various landmarks, attractions and events - and one place leapt out above the rest: the Museum of Atrocities, Ancient and Modern. The building, situated adjacent to the theatre, was currently host to a special exhibition entitled: 'The Curse of the Time Lords'.

The place was deserted, most of the tourists here were crammed into the theatre to marvel at the magician. In only took two exhibits to confirm the Doctor's suspicions: a photographic display of Freygal's capital city under bombardment from TDTs (time dispersal torpedoes), a Time Lord weapon now stored in the Omega Arsenal, and a holographic model of how the city must have once looked, complete with a high speed sky corridor extending from a man-made crater and rising up to the edge of this galaxy. A press of a button simulated the flight path of advanced time and space crafts of various designs heading in and out of the underground docking bays from and to worlds now firmly out of reach.

It was the clearness of the red sky that had made the deepest impact on the Doctor. So sharp was the contrast to the oppressive atmosphere of the dense clouds, which almost looked as if they were threatening to fall down onto the planet. The flight corridor was long gone and every species of bird presumably extinct. The state of this planet and its people was not through a gradual evolutionary decline, nor was it the result of their scientists having overstepped the mark with their inventions. Centuries may have passed but these people were still living in the aftermath of a very one-sided war.

The Doctor hardly needed any more reasons to be ashamed of his Time Lord roots, but this was something else: the ultimate hypocrisy - using this corner of the universe as an object lesson in how the Time Lord policy of non-intervention is a moral imperative, when the tragic isolation of the Freygalians had been manufactured by his jealous forebears. Though the historians of this world were right to condemn the Time Lords, Tazalia's fate suggested that the Freygalians' interpretation of the 'curse' was fundamentally flawed. The Doctor was

now driven by a new mission - to set these Freygalians free and to undo the damage caused by his own people.

* * *

Reg's encore was something of an anti-climax. The vanishing magician had reappeared in the correct dimensions and was thanking the audience with some fairly run of the mill and poorly executed sleight of hand tricks which betrayed his lack of skills. Nonetheless to Alison's surprise the crowd were still lapping it all up. Clearly these aliens did not know how to do a big finish. She was about to go off in search of the Doctor, when to the disharmonious sound of the cloister bells, the TARDIS doors flung open. Reg walked straight inside, waving goodbye to his fans in order to signal the end of the show. The Doctor will have to wait, Alison decided as she fought her way back onto the stage and ran into the TARDIS after the magician.

* * *

The Master was plugged into the console in recharge mode. Eight months of travelling with the Doctor, it had taken until just a couple of days ago for Alison to get used to the horrific sight of the Master's uncannily human face opening out on an invisible hinge, to reveal a mess of circuits within. It was a position he did not always adopt out of necessity. Sometimes, she was sure he would do it for effect, in order to watch her squirm. This time is was dearly intended merely for the benefit of the stranger.

To Alison's surprise, Reg was untroubled by the dimensional paradox of the TARDIS' interior, and he was even taking in his stride the Master's roboticised face.

"It's been a long time since I last met a Time Lord," he said bitterly. "But I had no idea your species were only part organic."

The clunking sound of the Master's face clamping shut, still made Alison squeamish.

"Do you have to be so indiscreet," she said.

Reg hadn't noticed her enter the TARDIS behind him. "Twenty years, and near on 14,000 worlds and not a single Time Lord - and now two show up at

once? Does your TARDIS have a full crew?" he said.

"My good fellow, I can assure you there is only one Time Lord here. Miss Cheney here is my human assistant," said the Master.

"Don't listen to him, he's not really a full on Time Lord, not anymore any way. The Doctor will be back soon. This TARDIS belongs to him," said Alison. "Now, how about you follow the Master's lead and take off your mask. Show me what's really going on in that head of yours. I find it very disconcerting not having the first clue about what you might be thinking. Come on - the act is over."

"I don't wear it as part of the act," said Reg, frightening the hell out of Alison as he took a closer look and circled her menacingly, just close enough to stroke the side of her face with his wand.

"The mask offers dual protection," he explained. "It keeps the world safe from me, and me safe from the world. Behold, the curse of the Time Lords."

Reg lifted the mask, to reveal a hideously deformed face underneath. It was grotesque enough thought Alison, but when she noticed that the weeping scales and blisters on the magician were

continuously reforming, with pieces of flesh dropping off into a container built into his costume just below its frilly neck-line, the monster in front of her became a living hell.

"That's gross, what's wrong with you?" she said. "And how do you empty that thing?"

"Are you being deliberately ignorant? How about I show you some more?" said Reg.

Without waiting for an answer, he pulled apart the top half of his outfit.

Reg's chest was suffering from the same skin condition. Alison recoiled as she realised that the bottom of the container was connected to his body via several tiny tubes. Inside the box, the pieces of broken flesh were being converted into a liquid before re-entering his bloodstream through the tubes.

"This device is keeping me alive. It enables my body to reabsorb its lost cells. Without it, I would have slowly died like everybody else who inadvertently activated the curse by travelling outside our system. Even with it, I'm only barely alive."

"Why do you call it the curse of the Time Lords?" said Alison.

"Because this is what we did to them. The universe only has room for one superior race," answered the Master. "It almost makes one proud to be a Time Lord."

"I thought... I thought that maybe you had come to help? I didn't think a civilisation as advanced as my own, could be so irredeemable. Young woman, you say your friend is a Doctor?" said Reg.

"Yes... but-"

"You don't need to wait for the Doctor. I can help you, Reg," said the Master. "How about I make a deal with you."

The Doctor strode back to the auditorium, flicking his sonic screwdriver on and off and twirling it around playfully. Over the years, he'd come up with a hundred and one different uses for the gadget, all in the services of saving others. He'd modified it countless times, adding new functions as if he'd been trying to wash away the sin of his first unconventional use of what should have been an innocuous device. It was all he had had to hand

when it came to fighting off the monster that attacked him in the space port on that fateful school field trip. He had no idea its effect would have been so devastating as he pushed it into the creature's midriff. The beast had exploded into a mess of rotting, ancient flesh before dropping dead beside him.

The screwdriver belonged to Tazalia. It was a standard issue SS25 designed with the engineering student in mind, but since the Doctor had chosen not to pursue that particular subject he had no idea how to use the thing. Tazalia on the other hand could work miracles with it. Without the sonic screwdriver she would not have been able to get the trade ship up and running again. Fortuitously for the Doctor, she had left it behind when she jetted off. He had been so desperate to find her family another memento, so that he could keep it without guilt.

The enormity of the Time Lords' intervention on Freygal was such that finding a solution was not going to be easy. Could his little trusted friend help reverse such a violent act of containment against a whole civilisation? No doubt he would find a way of

making it form part of the solution, but for now he was stumped. Fortunately back on the TARDIS, he had another powerful mind to help, his friend turned nemesis, the Master. It had been a strange and uneasy alliance. Not a day would pass without the Doctor regretting his compassion and optimism in saving him. But there had been times when the Master had proved useful. He hated to admit it, but without the Master's albeit reluctant help, some of his latest adventures might not have been so successful. If ever the Doctor needed that combination of burning intelligence and brilliant cunning to complement his own knack for improvisation and for thinking outside of the box, it was now.

As the Doctor stepped onto the stage, to his horror the TARDIS was in the throes of another dematerialisation. The Master, being connected to the TARDIS, could carry out manual tasks, such as setting new coordinates, but he shouldn't have been able to effect a dematerialisation without the TARDIS' consent. And the TARDIS, sentient enough to know where it was, would surely not wish to

leave its owner in such an unreachable universe.

"Permission denied!" shouted the Doctor, voicing what the TARDIS should have been thinking. "He can't possible have overridden 'permission denied'."

"It's the magician at work again. He'll be taking his prop back to his universe," said one of the hangers-on from the crowd, in awe of Reg's abilities.

"His prop?" said the Doctor, disgusted. "I have you know that... oh never mind."

The Doctor could hardly boast about being a Time Lord - he'd be arrested, lynched or tortured such was the understandable hostility of the Freygalians towards his people. He would need to earn their trust if he was to relieve them of their so-called curse.

It was taking an inordinately long time for the TARDIS to enter the vortex, and to the Doctor's relief the dematerialisation was aborted.

The Doctor tetchily opened the TARDIS, despite the protests of the remaining crowd, and attempted to step inside, ready to give the old girl a piece of his mind.

"You can't go in there," said one concerned

onlooker, pulling him back.

He was soon being mobbed by several angry Freygalians."Oh no? Well, that is where you are quite wrong. I'm his assistant... see", replied the Doctor, waving his sonic screwdriver.

"Behold the magician's wand," he said before adding, "Mightier than the sword," as he pointed the sonic to what he assumed to be the sprinklers in the roof, setting them off. He hadn't anticipated them being filled with rapidly expanding foam rather than water. But the outcome was the same as in the ensuing confusion, he made his escape.

* * *

"What the hell have you done?" screamed Alison. "You can't leave the Doctor behind? You are nothing without him. And what do you want with me?"

"Relax, Miss Cheney. The Doctor will be fine. His TARDIS will still be there for him."

"What do you mean, his TARDIS?" replied Alison, sure as hell that they were still inside it and currently travelling to god knows where.

"Put yourself in my shoes. If you were offered a rare and unique chance of freedom? Wouldn't you take it? Now, tell me a time, a place in your past, that you remember as clear as day. Somewhere you'd be able to notice even the tiniest of differences?"

"And what did you do to the magician? Where is he?"

"Oh do pay attention, young lady. I know the Doctor has picked some dumb companions over the years in order to make him look clever, but really he ought to have done better than to recruit a complete ignoramus. Now answer my question - we need to make sure we have crossed into a parallel universe before I can risk leaving the TARDIS. A place ... a time which you'd remember with total clarity, as if it happened yesterday."

'The day I met the Doctor?"

"No, that won't do. Let's keep him out of this. Go back even further..."

"Okay, okay," said Alison. "November 18th 1984. My eighth birthday. The corner shop on Hope Street, on the way home from school ... it would

have been three-thirty give or take a minute or two."

"Then that is where we will go. But a word of warning. We watch and don't interfere. The differences might be obvious - the shop might not even exist in this world. But more likely, they will be tiny, like the clothes you were wearing that day, perhaps just mere words or even their intonation. Are you sure you can remember it in sufficient detail."

"I have relived that five minutes of my life every single day. It haunts me in my dreams. Trust me. I'll know," replied Alison slowly.

"Perfect. Absolutely perfect my child," grinned the Master.

* * *

The Doctor had little time for the superstitions of his people, but even for him, coming face to face with a member of a mythical race he'd first known about from heretical Time Lord legends felt eerily holy. It was the equivalent of seeing a real life Toclafane, which he was certain would never happen. It should

have been impossible, not because the Freygalians did not exist, but because the Time Lords had gone to great lengths to make it so. Outside the TARDIS, the sheer numbers and apparent ordinariness of the people mitigated against such an atypical feeling. But here was one of them in his own TARDIS? And there was something unique about him. This Reg was a Freygalian who seemed far more connected to the ancient past, when the myths about them were first formed. His magic act had already suggested that like the rest of the population here, who seemed no more advanced than the human race, he still had access to the higher technology that the ancient Freygalians were famed for.

"You must be the Doctor," said Reg.

"And you are anything but," countered the Doctor. "A Doctor prides himself on his hard cold realism, whereas tricksters like yourself... well, you do so love to create a mystique around you. Apparently you are almost some kind of god to them. You don't fool me."

"I think I much preferred your hotwired friend."

"Where is the Master, anyway? I'm assuming he's

spun you a pack of lies about us. Let me think - this is his ship and I'm his plus one."

'There is no lie that could be worse than the truth about your race. But, judging from your shifty demeanour, I think you already know that, eh?"

"Hmmm. Well, at least you've done away with the magician's mask. I never trust anyone who chooses to hide his face."

"If you'd have seen how I looked before, you'd have known exactly why I wore that mask. But thanks to the kindness of your friend, I have finally been cured of the curse of the Time Lords."

"I doubt that..." said the Doctor.

"Your people infected us with a unique carcinogenic virus, one that causes debilitating and ultimately deadly deformities every time we travel beyond our systems, across time and space. It killed my civilisation in an instance. Trapping us here in the Freygalian galaxy."

"I read the reports, in your museum," said the Doctor. "But I can assure you, I had no idea. To my shame, the Time Lords have propagated a very different version of events."

"Well, thanks to your friend, I have the cure. My people will rediscover what it is to travel the stars. And when we do, we will wipe out the Time Lords forever."

"Spare a thought for the good ones, eh?"

"The good ones? Doctor, I travelled across thousands of parallel Freygal's looking for a way to escape the curse, but every universe I crossed told the same story. The Time Lords didn't just do this once. They did it on a potentially infinite number of parallel worlds. The curse of the Time Lords is a fixed point in parallel time."

"That's impossible. Fixed points can only occur in one time-stream. How have you been travelling across them?"

"I'd show you, but I gave it to the Master and his lady friend, in exchange for the cure."

"You did what? Where is he?" said the Doctor urgently.

"He used the void manipulator. Took the hand of his companion and together they will have entered a randomly generated parallel world. The technology was good, but not that good."

"You should have known never to trust a Time Lord. Show me that cure of his..."

* * *

The Master, true to form was relishing the opportunity to extoll the brilliance of his latest scheme to Alison, his captive audience.

"Using a void manipulator inside a TARDIS ... I couldn't be sure, but there was a good chance of this happening, and the TARDIS herself obviously approved. She let us go after all. I think she and I had both had enough of each other. When we made the jump a parallel TARDIS was created, because we were travelling in the vortex."

"But aren't you simply trapped in this one instead? What difference does it make?"

"On the contrary. If the original TARDIS 'thinks' we are still inside her, then in theory, I can step out anywhere in this parallel universe. The only drawback is the need to return to the console room every now and then to recharge. You see Miss Cheney, this whole universe is now inside her."

"So your freedom is an illusion?"

"Well, at least I don't have the Doctor breathing all over me. I am free to travel anywhere I choose in this universe, and as an added bonus, I don't have to suffer the confounded hum of her engines, or the distinctive smell of a type 42. I can forget I am part of the TARDIS."

* * *

"You let him get away with this just so that you can forget you are part of the Master?" said the Doctor angrily as he kicked the console. "You let him go, and worse than that, take Alison with him? What is wrong with you? Do you want me all to yourself or something?"

Reg felt the TARDIS shake, but whether the ship was responding as a scorned partner or a chided child, he couldn't quite tell.

"Doctor," said Reg. "Calm down. He cured me, the evidence is here for all to see. If you can't save everyone this time, at least one of us has been given a chance. And my salvation could bring freedom to

millions. Leave us for your own protection and let me rebuild Freygal."

"Leave you to create a civilisation which might one day rise up against my people? I don't think so. Whatever crimes we have committed can be undone without vengeance. And as for your evidence. I think you ought to take a long, hard look at yourself."

The Doctor pulled out an impossibly big mirror from his coat pocket and reflected the truth onto Reg. The cure had only been temporary. The deformities were slowly returning.

"I am sorry Reg. This container, your apparent cure - the Master filled it with nanogenes, but the curse as you call it, regenerates. Temporal rather than physical multiplication. As soon as your body absorbed the nanogenes, they started to die as your cells underwent yet another transformation."

"Then be a Doctor and help me. If you are the only good Time Lord then who else is there in the multiverse who can save me from this curse?"

"Why not continue as you have done all these years, what is it with this obsession with leaving?"

The Doctor immediately regretted his words. He should know more than most the lure of the stars. But as Reg opened up about his family, the Doctor was a little disappointed at what he took to be a distinct lack of ambition. It was a warped and cynical view of the value of familial relationships: he knew as much - this reticence to be tied down to friends and family was something he had carried with him ever since losing Tazalia. It was a defining experience even though there were greater losses to come.

"There is only one way I can save you," said the Doctor in resignation. "But without the void manipulator... Entirely random, you say?"

"The only failsafe is that it stores your last known location. But it can only go back once. If the Master uses it twice, we will never see him again. We will have no way of knowing which universe he is in. I used to reverse the process after each of my failed trips, so that I could always to return to Freygal One. My home universe is lost to me for good now, I gave it up in exchange for the cure."

"Then what was the point? You'd never get to see

your family again even with the cure?"

"I'd rather be a citizen of the universe, whichever one that might be, than trapped in one small corner of infinity, knowing my family was near and yet so far away."

"Halfway to paradise..." muttered the Doctor.

"One day perhaps there will be a way to go home, but not until I've broken free of this ever-repeating hell."

"The Master isn't going to return of his own free will. By operating the void manipulator in the vortex he has created his own universe to play in. It will be his idea of paradise. Our only hope is with Alison. We need to get a message to her - instructions on how to operate the manipulator's kick back function."

* * *

Alison was torn, she did not want to be stuck with this megalomaniac cyborg on a parallel world she could never return from. She had made a promise to Joe: her adventures with the Doctor would be just a

brief interruption, a chance to find herself so that she could return with a new commitment to the people she held dear. Well, that was the theory at least. But the thought of going back to that fateful day when her childhood innocence was cruelly stolen from her? ... Well, she'd rather be in hell than witness those moments again, especially as an impotent bystander. Part of her hoped that they had indeed travelled to a new world - one that was much kinder than her own.

But the shop was there, exactly how she remembered it. The Master had landed the TARDIS in a nearby alleyway, giving her the first clue that this was indeed 1984 - a year before the council started to build alley-gates. This was her short cut to school whenever Mum was too busy to walk her the long way round - itwas here that Alison experienced her first snog: making out with Susie Wilkins as a dare, and a few weeks after the corner shop tragedy, she'd be standing almost exactly where the TARDIS landed, trying to light her first cigarette. As she reached the end of the alleyway, dodging the overgrown stinging nettles and brambles she

spotted a young girl on a scooter approaching the intersection, wearing an "I am 8" badge, proudly pinned to her school jumper. Sure enough, Alison's mother was struggling to keep up on account of her 30 fags a day no doubt. So far, this was exactly as Alison remembered it. Although it was odd to see her memories externalised, the girl's smile betrayed that same giddy excitement that Alison had felt as she'd headed towards Mr Patel's in search of birthday candles. It looks like the same me, thought Alison. She could always lie to the Master she thought, but then again if he did get himself permanently deactivated she'd be trapped here for good. Relieving the rest of the eighties and nineties again, even as an adult, was not particularly appealing.

Another thought struck her, the implications of which were beyond her. But it didn't matter right now - what was to stop her from changing the past? All she had to do was stick a leg out and trip the girl over. A birthday ruined by a visit to A & E would be far less devastating than what was waiting for them in the shop.

Alison had forgotten about the steepened section of kerb just before the alleyway. The child unexpectedly veered towards it, flying over the edge as if she was doing an Evil Kneval stunt. Alison could still stop them by jumping out and warning her mother to turn back, but rather than look like a mad woman she decided to make a run for it so as to reach the shop ahead of them.

The shop was identical and it was no surprise to see Mr Patel behind the counter.

"Birthday candles," said Alison breathlessly.

"We do various types. Which ones would you like, dear?"

"As long as there's at least eight in the packet it really doesn't matter. Come on Mr Patel," she said.

Mr Patel frowned.

"Oh so you are another one who assumes we are all called Patel." "Eh?"

"Well, by sheer chance, you are right. But try that trick in the Seven-Eleven, and Mr Chatterjee will be most offended. That will be thirty pence please."

Alison looking rather pleased with herself, handed over a twenty and a ten pence coin. She was

lucky she still had the change inside her jacket. She felt like the Doctor who always seemed to be able to pull out just the right thing from his copious pockets.

"Goodness gracious me, what a terrible piece of fakery. You'd have thought the forgers would get the right size," said Mr Patel, tossing the anachronous ten pence piece back at Alison.

Alison looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry - I've just got back from a trip to Ireland," she said. "I really need these candles for an important little girl's birthday. Would you trust me enough to take them and come back later with the money."

"With that smile, I would trust you with my life," laughed Mr Patel, slowly and deliberately placing the candles in a paper bag and folding it meticulously.

"Thanks, I owe you one," said Alison grabbing it off him impatiently. "I don't suppose you'd listen to me if I told you to shut up shop for the rest of the day?" she added, grabbing a handful of sweets and hoping he'd chase her out of his shop with that broom of his, just like he regularly did with

Holmesy and his gang.

But as she reached the door, to her horror, this surreal experience started to merge with her recurring nightmares.

There he was, standing in the doorway. A lanky, masked man, dressed in a magician's outfit.

Alison made a feeble joke. One that would have been completely wasted on them.

"What school are you from?" she said, "Hogwarts school of witchcraft and wizardry?"

For a moment there was an awkward stand off as Alison blocked the stranger's entrance into the shop. If she let him pass, there was a good chance that... but, then again, her priority had to be to protect her younger self. Alison stepped aside and left the shop.

* * *

The Master was watching the events unfolding from Alison's viewpoint on a display in the TARDIS. He had fitted a camera inside her eyes, a useful device he'd stolen from one of Earth's confounded alien fighting agencies.

"Yes," he said to himself as the girl on the scooter came closer. "Finally. Just go to her... it's the only way to be sure."

* * *

Alison crouched down and showed the young girl the packet of candles.

Her mother had stopped a little further back, trying to light another cigarette in the wind.

"Here," said Alison. "Take them to your mother. Tell her that they came from your birthday fairy."

"There's no such thing silly. Mummy told me not to take anything off a stranger."

The girl dropped her scooter and ran into the shop.

"No!" shouted Alison, following after her and pulling her back.

The magician's wand was being waved in Mr Patel's face as he demanded the shopkeeper hand over the contents of the till.

"Come on Packi, I want it all."

"You can't beat me with a wand," said Mr Patel.

"Not when I have this," he added, pulling out what the kids called his broom of doom from behind the counter.

"Go get your Mummy - tell her to call the police," whispered Alison to the girl.

But her eight year old self wasn't one to run away from danger.

"I'm not scared of you," she shouted to the masked man. "And nor is Mr Patel. I've seen what he can do with that broom."

"Yeah, is that so," said the robber. "Well, you might want to rethink that, little girl."

That clicking sound the wand made as it flicked open up to reveal the knife inside, was just as loud as it had been in Alison's dreams.

It was the same weapon that had been used to kill Mr Patel, in front of Alison and her Mum who had stood there frozen in fear as the robber fled with the cash.

* * *

As soon as Alison had touched her younger self, the

Master knew that this was indeed a parallel universe. He was free at last.

He stepped out of the TARDIS, aware that the only danger now was running out of charge. Rather inconveniently he only had a few minutes before he would need to reconnect with the TARDIS, but he simply had to feel the air of an alien atmosphere, experience the sights, sounds, and smells of an environment that was not of the TARDIS' making. Even the painful sting of the nettles was joyous.

He followed the route Alison had taken to the shop, eager to boast about his success to the human girl. No doubt, she'd be still interfering in whatever it was that she presumed was perfectly etched on her memory. He knew it would have been a painful one. The ones that stick usually are. This was probably Alison's equivalent to his memory of Tazalia and the field trip to hell, he thought.

The Master had banked on Alison not being able to stop herself from interfering. Had this been her world, the paradox of the two Alison's making contact would have consigned her to total oblivion. Memory is inherently flawed, there was no way real

life events could be perfectly mirrored by their recollection. It was simply a rouse to avoid her unnecessary and tiresome resistance.

The Master sighed and grumbled to himself: "Every silver lining has a cloud." The need to flit between the worlds of this universe and the TARDIS was not such an inconvenience after all, he thought, as a frantic Mrs Cheney approached him. He had taken his solitude for granted - it definitely had its plusses. How the Doctor put up with the emotionalism of such an inferior species he would never understand.

"Please, you have to help me," she cried, dragging him towards the shop. "It's my daughter..."

* * *

"My TARDIS and the Master are still connected, subconsciously. They are both in denial."

The Doctor was explaining to Reg that despite being in a parallel universe, Alison was not beyond reach.

"He is still in a way part of this reality. We might

not be able to travel to his universe, but the TARDIS should be able to manipulate it. We can talk to Alison through her."

"And announce to the Master our intentions?"

"We will have a window of opportunity when he is recharging. The TARDIS might be able to forget about him now, but she will know when he is directly connected to the shadow TARDIS' console."

The Doctor programed the void manipulator instructions into the TARDIS, ready to transmit them to Alison as soon as the Master was plugged back in.

"I find it hard to believe that you two were once friends," said Reg. "We were inseparable."

"And you've tried to recover those good old days of companionship artificially, by forcing him to travel with you?"

"I saved his life, which is more than he ever did for me. He left me to die in your abandoned space port. We both lost a dear friend that day."

"What happened to this other friend of yours?"

"I did. I killed her. Or rather the monster she had become. So you see, the Master's life might be

unnatural, and yes he is physically and psychologically beyond repair ... but, this time ... this time every monster lives."

"Every monster?"

"Such is my relentless optimism and my pathological desire to find the light in the darkest of places, that one day, who knows - I might even have a cyberman for a companion. In fact, I think I'll add that to my wish list."

"You are a complex man, Doctor. Is that what happens when you set yourself up as the saviour of worlds? Face it Doctor, you're a Time Lord, you can't fight the evil within, however much you deny it. "

The shop was in a state of total carnage.

Mr Patel, instead of handing over the contents of the till, had attempted to knock the masked robber out with the broom.

This was the moment the blade should have gone through his heart, but Alison charged at the robber, head down like a bull, hoping to knock the weapon out his hand.

She ended up on top of him and ripped off the mask.

To her horror and complete bemusement the face was hideously deformed, just like the Freygalian magician's.

He managed to push her away and to the sound of hysterical screaming from the other, younger Alison, he fled the scene, leaving a trail of wasted flesh behind him.

Alison looked up at Mr Patel to check he was okay.

In silence the shopkeeper began to brush up the mess left by the robber, as if it was everyday dust.

Alison went to comfort her younger self.

"Are you ok, I'm sorry you had to witness such a horrible thing on your eighth birthday. But, you're safe now. He's gone."

But the young Alison was staring at Mr Patel.

He had his hand to his cheek.

"What's happening to me?" he said, peeling off a layer of flesh.

Mr Patel was being transformed into the same hideous creature that Reg and the intruder had already become.

Involuntarily, Alison checked her own face as

her mother sauntered in obliviously.

"Bit late for Halloween," she said, laughing about the man who had just run away. "Takes all sorts I guess. Come on then Alison, let's get these cand—"

Alison's mother's scream was even worse than the one that usually woke Alison from the recurrent dream.

Her beautiful daughter's face was changing rapidly.

"What it is - some kind of chemical spillage? What on earth have you been storing in here?" shouted Alison's mother at Mr Patel.

But when the shopkeeper turned around to reveal his monstrous appearance, she screamed again.

"I don't know what's happening to them," said Alison. "But you need to get an ambulance here at once."

The shop's phone line had been cut by the robber, forcing Alison's mother to rush outside for help.

* * *

As Mrs Cheney returned to the shop with the Master in tow, Alison was furious, but held back from confronting him just yet.

"Have you called for an ambulance, your daughter - I think she is dying," she said urgently.

"Don't worry my dear. I am a Doctor," grinned the Master.

The Master examined the two victims, stepping with ease into the role, albeit with an obvious air of distain.

"What is it?" said Alison's mother."Memory meltdown," said the Master bluntly, *before* raising *his* eyebrows at Alison.

"Don't worry. I used to be a paramedic, your daughter will be *in* safe hands when ... if, they get here."

He reached for an imaginary pocket-watch in his waistcoat *before* muttering to himself:

"Seventeen, sixteen, fifteen..."

With impeccable timing, by the time he had counted down to zero, Alison's mother had undergone a similar transformation.

None of the afflicted could speak, but it wasn't

for want of trying- the glutinous scales had sealed their mouths shut.

The Master offered his arm to Alison.

"Come, my dear... don't worry about them - a whole universe awaits. This is no doubt a temporary glitch while *she stabilises* herself."

"We can't just leave them here,"

"No. You are quite right Miss Cheney," said the Master as one by one, he stabbed them with the discarded knife. "Call it a mercy killing. It's better than the alternative of keeping them alive in such a state. Good job the Doctor was not here, he'd have sooner see I them suffer an eternal hell than kill them."

* * *

Much to the amusement of Reg, the Doctor had been cajoling the TARDIS into cooperating with his plan to get Alison and the Master back, for a good half an hour at least.

"If ever my race gains the freedom to travel again," Reg said "There's not *a* chance we'll be

creating sentient machines. She she's more trouble than she's worth. A sulking ship is worse than a sinking one."

"She'll come round, she always does. She's a type 42, notorious for their bouts of stubbornness like their chief designer. Fortunately the model is flawed, they can never keep it up for long," said the Doctor.

The Time Lord smiled as the tolling of the cloister bell began right on cue.

"I think you've really hurt her feelings now," said Reg, holding his ears from the incessant wailing.

"You think that's a cry of defiance? Well, you couldn't be further from the truth ... that my friend means it's game on."

* * *

Alison was slumped in a corner of the console room, devastated and disgusted by the fate of her other self. But as much as she hated him right now, it was hard to dispute his claim that, for once, he had done the right thing.

"You didn't have to sound like you were enjoying

it," she said.

The Master ignored her, it was crucial he had no distractions. It was time to recharge and if truth be told he was a little uncertain about how this might play out. He was taking extra care to ensure that all the correct protocols had been followed. This TARDIS clone might not be as forgiving as the original.

As soon as the connection was made, the distant chimes of the cloister bell brought Alison out of her malaise. The Master had no independent existence in rapid charge mode - his body had been deactivated, but he was convulsing in time with the beat of the bell.

She did not want to be around him, when he woke up at optimum power. Everything about him was sharper after a recharge - including his arrogance, hubris and wit. He would be more insufferable than ever.

She stepped outside of the TARDIS and walked back down to the street that looked so eerily like home.

That time of day, there ought to have been plenty

of pedestrians and cars about, and yet the only people she had seen were the ones from her memory.

Out of curiousity she peered into the windows of some of the houses. Presumably everyone in this universe would have been affected by this temporal glitch as the Master called it. To her surprise they were all frozen in a moment of time. She realised that it was only because they had seen her, that the four people she'd met had come to life and undergone the frightful transformation.

Even the TV screens were frozen.

Or were they?

Strangely, after a brief spell of snowy interference, the TV in number 5 was displaying row upon row of text. Alison couldn't quite see it clearly enough to read - but as she squinted to see more clearly, she was sure that the message had started with her name, repeated over and over.

She turned around and looked at the graffitied bus shelter on the opposite side of the road.

She blinked as "Alfie was 'ere," turned into "Alison, are you there?"

Feeling a bit silly even though she was quite possibly the only person still present in the universe, Alison answered aloud.

"Who's asking?"

There was of course, no reply. In fact the graffiti returned to normal.Alison decided her mind was clearly playing tricks on her as a result of the trauma she had been though.

* * *

"Is it working - is the girl getting the message?" asked Reg.

"Come on Alison," said the Doctor urgently. "Pay attention."

Angrily he bashed the console as the message faded.

"Give it all you've got," he said to the TARDIS. "Every ounce of reserve power, and then some. Make it so that she has to listen."

* * *

Alison was heading back to the TARDIS, when she heard the sound of the cloister bell once again. This time it was coming from above her.

As she looked up, the clouds started to form a word.

"Alison?"

And now everywhere she looked, there was her name with a great big question mark - in the ripples of the puddles, the condensation on the car windows, the lettering on the street sign, and even the paint of the lines in the middle of the road: they were all being reconfigured for her benefit.

"Is that you? Doctor?" she said, beginning to feel the first ray of hope.

Only the Doctor could have the power and the nerve to turn a whole environment into a communication tool.

* * *

As soon as Alison had uttered the Doctor's name, the TARDIS knew she had made contact *and* began to transmit the rest *of the* message.

"Not before time," *said the* Doctor.

* * *

Within minutes, Alison and the Master were back in the Doctor's TARDIS.

" *For once*, I want to *be here when he* wakes *up!" said* Alison, looking *forward to* seeing the Master's look *of* disappointment and *failure.*

"Truly, you are a Lord," said *Reg,* admiringly to the Doctor. "Manipulating *an environment* like that, it's..."

"At least I *did it for the* right reasons," said the Doctor, taking no satisfaction in *his brilliance.*

"What *do you mean?" said Reg.*

"The curse of the Time Lords. It wasn't in your genes. My forebears didn't infect your bodies, not directly so anyway. The curse is in the atmosphere you breathe. That's why even a Time Lord was *affected by it."*

"Perhaps that's how they did it in this universe, but what's to say they didn't use a different method in mine?" said Reg.

"No, no," said the Doctor. "You see, you were wrong about the *Time Lords. The curse as you* call it, their evil isn't a foregone *conclusion."*

"I travelled to thousands of worlds, they all told the same story," protested Reg. "Doctor, you truly are one of a kind."

"It was the void manipulator that made me realise," said the Doctor. "The device can only take you to worlds from which it had been invented. In other words, all those universes and an infinite number of others are all branches from the one event in the one world. This Freygal and every other one you visited were all born from your own. The curse of the Time Lords only happened once. Well, this particular atrocity anyway. The void manipulator is a ridiculous device, one that could only have been conceived out of the desperation of being unable to travel in space and time."

"So there are other Freygals, where my people still journey to the stars?"

"An infinite number of them, yes," said the Doctor. "And an infinite number where the Time Lords do the right thing, and live side by side with

your people."

The revelation was a mixed blessing for Reg. It confirmed his fear of being permanently trapped, but it gave him some comfort to know that there were, after all, Freygalians living their dreams.

"Come on, Doctor," said Alison. "I was wrong. You were born to save others. Don't let this trip be different from all your others. There has to be a way of helping him?"

"As a matter of fact, yes there is," said the Doctor. "Reg, how do you fancy your own TARDIS. A man of your intellect can work out how to operate it, but if not, there'll be a manual - somewhere."

"But Doctor, the curse..." said Reg.

"By using the void manipulator with the TARDIS in mid-flight there's a good chance you could end up in a parallel Freygal that wasn't born from your own. No guarantees mind."

"You don't mind. Won't it mean we will always share a connection, through your TARDIS?"There is one condition, mind. You ditch the magician act. Especially that cheap, two dimensional *trick."*

"I only did it to make the best out *of* a *bad*

situation," confessed Reg.

"And a little piece *of advice* just before you *go*. It's got me out of many a tricky situation. When in doubt... run for your life."

* * *

Later that night, leaving the Master to sulk inside the TARDIS, the Doctor took Alison to the Eye of Orion.

They sat there awhile, admiring the view.

"You see," said the Doctor. "There are places in this vast universe where all I can do is marvel at its wonder and beauty. Places I wouldn't want to understand. Places where even I feel very small and insignificant."

Alison put her arm around him and the Doctor flinched, embarrassed by such intimacy.

"Thank you, Doctor, it's moments exactly like this I was looking for when I first came on board," she said. "You can't avoid the places that need a Doctor. Not when you can make so many people's dreams come true, like Reg. But sometimes, it's good

to see you... how can I say it, powerless? Besides Doctor, even you have to recharge your batteries every now and then."

"I have something for you, Alison. I hope you don't mind," said the Doctor, pulling out a whole gubblecake and a packet of birthday candles from his pocket.He placed eight candles on the cake and lit them with his sonic screwdriver.

The pair of them fought back the tears.

The Doctor had not touched another gubblecake since the death of Tazalia, and Alison had reacted angrily whenever a friend had asked why she never had candles on her birthday cakes.

"Eight months, we've been travelling together. It's a good excuse for an anniversary celebration. And perhaps tonight we can blow away our demons together," said the Doctor.

Alison smiled, there was no need to make a wish as they both took a deep breath, ready to blow out the candles.

For tonight, eight months on, Alison Cheney's dream had come true.

FROZEN IN TIME

DANIEL TESSIER

The Axis was everywhere, and nowhere. A singularity, and an infinity of infinities. All things could be found here, everything that existed, or had ever existed, or could ever exist. The entire history of the universe was laid out, for the very few beings that were capable of perceiving such things. Not merely this universe, but all universes. Timelines diverging from the core reality like limbs from the trunk of a tree, if a tree happened to be an eleven-dimensional hypersphere with infinite branches. Most of these timelines were natural occurrences, essential variations in the passage of history. Others

were artificial, induced, forced, even broken.

The Axis held all such possibilities together, in some form of order, incomprehensible to most minds.

There were, however, minds that perceive the order in the Axis. Beings that were capable of traversing the no-space between realities, when the conditions were exactly right. Beings that could, given the right window of opportunity, lend their influence across any number of universes...

The noise was relentless, an unending cacophony of unmelodic droning that broke through even the deepest layers of sleep. It would have made a perfect alarm clock, the Doctor considered, as he rose from his sleep. It was a luxury he afforded himself rarely, and so it was inevitable that it would be broken by this racket. Hastily fixing his clothes, the Doctor stormed from his under-used bedroom and through the winding corridors of the TARDIS, his expression grave.

He stalked down the walkway into the control room, only to see the Master contentedly stooped over the console, studying something that has

apparently occupied his full attention. The Doctor waved a hand in front of his mechanical shipmate's face, breaking his concentration.

"Had you somehow failed to notice that alarm going off, not two feet from your head?" The Doctor snapped, angrily flipping a toggle on the console and silencing the noise. A gramophone speaker retracted into its compartment within the console, removing itself from view.

The Master turned to face him, his expression studiedly neutral.

"I switched my aural circuits off about an hour ago," he said. "Your snoring was carrying throughout the Ship. It was becoming quite impossible to focus."

"Poppycock!" replied the Doctor, knotting his cravat and buttoning his waistcoat. "I do not snore."

"It's rather like trying to work under an omnibus while the engine is running. Perhaps next time you decide to take a nap you could activate your respiratory bypass. I'm sure a few hours without breathing would be a small price for sparing my ears."

"Your ears are artificial."

"And all the more sensitive for it." The Master looked at the Doctor's expectant expression. "Was there something else?"

'The alarm indicates a Priority One distress call. If you could turn your head slightly and tell me what was sending it?"

With a heavy sigh, quite unfitting for someone who didn't actually breathe, the Master studied the readouts.

"Planetary system HR2003 Alpha. The planet Heimdall. Mid thirty-third century."

The Doctor allowed himself to settle into the easy chair that was hidden in the darkest corner of the console room.

"Heimdall... I vaguely recall a human colony there. Nothing especially interesting, far from the main space routes. Probably a bunch of colonists making a mountain out of a molehill. Still, we'd better go check it out."

"It's an icy rock on the fringes of explored space," replied the Master. "I can't imagine anything of interest there."

"Just take us there," ordered the Doctor. "Who knows? Maybe it'll surprise us."

The Master obligingly set the TARDIS on a flight to its new destination.

Clarice activated the latest frequency modulation, and repeated the distress call. It was the simplest of messages, nothing more than their planet's coordinates and an urgent call for help, repeated in a multitude of languages, from Galactic Basic to Draconian to Delphonic Morse.

As she sent out the latest message, she kept her eye on the receiver screen, ready for a reply. Any reply. Just something to show that someone, somewhere, had heard her.

"Anything?"

Stynes loomed over Clarice's shoulder, glaring at the displays, perhaps expecting her communications expert to have missed something. Clarice bit her lip and held back her irritation.

"No, Commander," she replied. "I'm broadcasting on all possible frequencies and modulations, and scanning on the same. If there's anyone out there, they'll hear us."

"There just isn't anyone out there," interjected Johan, slumped at his own console on the opposite side of the control room. The command centre had been fashioned from the bridge of the Nebula, the ship that had brought the colonists to Heimdall, with the control room previously having maintained much of the ship's functions. Now, it was mostly required for environmental maintenance, and Johan had little enough control over that in the current situation.

"There has to be someone," said Clarice, trying to convince herself as much as Johan.

"The closest starbase is nine light years away," pointed out Johan. "I know," Clarice snapped back.

"It'll be nine years before anyone hears your message. Radio is too primitive to be working with."

"It's what we have," stated Stynes, her tone indicating that she wanted this line on conversation brought to a close. "There are still vessels probing out here. There's ample chance that someone will pick up our distress call."

Johan snorted, earning a warning look from Stynes. He straightened up and looked intently at

his console. Clarice was about to say something, anything, to break the uncomfortable silence that followed, when something else did it for her. An unearthly grinding, wailing noise, unlike anything she had ever heard before, growing in volume until it was almost deafening. Sudden sparks of energy laced across the surfaces of the control room, causing Clarice and Johan alike to leap from there seats. In the centre of the room, a dark shape was forming.

Stynes spoke into her intercom. "Security to the control room immediately, code two."

The shape solidified with a load clunk; a deep blue upright block bearing the legend "Police Public Call Box." It looked just large enough for someone to stand inside. The doors set into its front opened, and that someone stepped out.

"Morning!" said the sallow-faced man who stepped out. He was clad in dark clothing in an archaic style, his brightly polished boots tapping loudly on the metallic floor.

Clarice would have expected Stynes to demand an explanation from the intruder immediately, but

she seemed momentarily stunned. Clarice had never seen such an expression on her face before - genuine shock. And was there just a hint of recognition in there?

"Well, don't everybody say hello at once," said the intruder, his rather forced smile dropping. "It was you who sent the distress call, wasn't it?"

Before anyone could respond, six armed guards burst into the room, brandishing weapons trained on the intruder. Stynes seemed suddenly more at ease.

"Explain yourself," she demanded. "Who are you and where the hell did you come from?"

The intruder sighed with frustration.

"I'm the Doctor, where I came from is somewhere I'm sure you've never heard of, I picked up your distress call and thought I'd drop in to see if I could help. Frankly, I don't know why I bother sometimes. I've been here less than two minutes and already there's a bunch of goons pointing rather antiquated pulse guns at

"At ease," commanded Stynes, and the half-dozen guards lowered their weapons. "The Doctor,

are you? And you just happened to be passing, in this thing?"

"The TARDIS," replied the Doctor. "It was in flight, which means that it was occupying every point in space and time simultaneously. So, in a manner of speaking... yes, I was just passing. Now, who sent the distress call and why?"

"Urn, I did," said Clarice. "Under Commander Stynes's orders, of course."

"And you are?"

"Clarice Osmond. I'm the communications specialist here."

The Doctor's face lit up. "Excellent!" he declared, fishing around in his pockets. "I've been having some trouble with my phone - blasted thing can't cope with this area of space for some reason.

Do you think you could have a look at it?"

"Doctor," interrupted Stynes, "Miss Osmond has more important things to worry about than your phone, as I'm certain do you. Do you want to know the reason for the distress call or not?"

The Doctor noticed Johan looking intently at the TARDIS door, standing very narrowly ajar. He

snapped it shut.

"Off!" he snarled, before turning back to the Stynes. "Yes, Commander, what was the problem?"

"The ice is attacking us."

The Doctor smiled. "Now I'm interested."

Heimdall was an ice planet, a rocky body a little larger than Mars, orbiting a dim, red star. While not a true ice world like Pluto or Cassius, it was on the very limit of planetary habitability, its surface perpetually covered in frozen water. At the poles, even the atmosphere began to condense onto the ice caps. It was not an ideal place for humans to settle, but it was best that System HR2003 Alpha had to offer.

The *Nebula* had been a deep space explorer, decades past its prime, converted to a colony ship. It had a straightforward, but difficult mission: build a base on Heimdall, at the very edge of known space, as a springboard for future exploration attempts.

"So why isn't the Earth government sending support?" asked the Doctor, warming his hands on the plastic beaker of hot tea that Clarice had handed him. He took a sip, and grimaced. It was dreadful.

"More important things closer to home," said Clarice, sipping at her own cup. "There's some political trouble with the local powers, I think. We don't hear much out here. But we've essentially been left to it."

"Not that we aren't capable of sustaining this colony," protested Stynes. "We converted the ship to become the base and proceeded to develop habitation areas around it, ready for more colonists in the future. There are - were - over a hundred of us. Not a huge force, but enough to keep this place going."

"But then something changed?" asked the Doctor.

"We sent an expeditionary force into the caves at the edge of the colony," continued Stynes. "Perfectly routine. Chart the area, mark any hazards and report back. Allows for thorough planning of future expansion."

"So you just kept going?" said the Doctor. "Kept expanding, for the Earth force that's never going to come?"

"They'll come Doctor, just as soon as circumstances allow. My job is just to prepare the

way."

The Doctor rolled his eyes, and took another brief sip of his bitter tea. "So what did your expedition find?"

"There was an artefact in the caves," said Clarice, breaking through the tension between Stynes and the Doctor. "Something some previous explorers had left, probably. Ezra had some theories on it, but he's... gone."

"He should have left it alone," stated Johan, earning a venomous look from Clarice. "No, he should have done. He could have studied it there, if he'd been serious about it. But he tried to move it, bring it back here."

"And that's when... the ice attacked?" suggested the Doctor.

"Creatures, made from the ice itself," added Stynes. "There's no way they can possibly be alive. The few we've taken out have shattered into perfectly ordinary water ice. But they keep coming, every day. They've killed thirteen people, and that's thirteen lives we cannot spare on a colony this size."

The Doctor looked Stynes in the eye. "No lives

can be spared, Commander, whatever the circumstance."

Clarice spoke up. "Doctor, they've been killing people. We've withdrawn into the core of the base. It seems to be safe here, they don't try to get further in than the perimeter domes. But if anyone goes outside the core, they attack. They kill anyone who tries." She shivered.

"And it's getting colder in here," said Johan, shivering himself. I'm trying to keep the environment regulated but we're operating on reserve power because we've been cut off from the deuterium stacks."

"We've been keeping the creatures at bay, Doctor," added Stynes, "but before too long, the cold will get us."

The Doctor appeared to consider the information he'd been given.

"We might be able to reroute the power from the deuterium stacks," he said, after some consideration. "However, that's likely only a temporary solution. Even if we make it, the creatures will surely just cut you off again. I wonder if this is instinctive

behaviour, or if they're being directed by some intelligence? Their cutting off the power suggests the latter."

An alarm began to sound. The six guards filed hurriedly out of the control room. The Doctor didn't appear to have noticed the commotion.

"No, I feel the best course of action would be to investigate this artefact you speak of," he muttered to himself, seemingly unaware that no one was listening.

Styne grabbed her intercom. "What the hell's happening?" she barked. There was a momentary pause before she received a response.

"It's the creatures, sir. They're at the inner barrier. I think they're trying to get in."

"How did they get through the perimeter?"

"I don't know sir, but Perkins and Murasaki are missing. I think they got them."

The Doctor leaped to his feet.

"Interesting!" he exclaimed. "You say they stay outside the perimeter, then two minutes after I get here, they suddenly start forcing their way in?"

"That's a bit suspicious, isn't it?" murmured

Johan, fixing the Doctor with a glare.

"Exactly!" The Doctor grinned. "They're obviously aware of my sudden appearance here. Advanced technology arrived on Heimdall, obviously the product of a more sophisticated civilisation than your own, and peaks their interest. Or, at least, the interest of whatever is controlling them."

"Doctor, this is not the time for theorising!" declared Styne. "Those creatures are killing my people. If you want to help, head out there and face them with me!"

"If you want me to help, let me think," retorted the Doctor. He turned to Clarice. "What do you use for communications at the perimeter? Radio? What frequency?"

Clarice blinked, taken aback by the sudden question, but quickly answered.

"Three point one gigahertz."

"That's too low, but we can adapt it. Back in the twentieth century, there were some unconscionable experiments with directed microwave weaponry. Appalling when used against human beings, but just

the thing to melt walking blocks of ice - if we get the frequency just right."

"Better get working then," said Clarice.

Styne stood at the rear of a squadron of soldiers as they unleashed projectile and energy weaponry against the approaching army of ice. Humanoid, but barely so, their forms distorted, lumps of jagged ice. They approached slowly but inexorably, their frozen bodies creaking and snapping as their rigid limbs moved them forward.

An ice creature lunged forward at the closest soldier, its razor-sharp icicle claws ripping through his sleeves and padding, into his flesh. The man cried out in pain, unable to retaliate before the monster was on top of him. It dragged him into the morass of ice. His fellow troops unleashed fire onto the creature, shattering its outer body, but it soon began to reform. The soldier lay still, his wounds already freezing over.

"Out of the way, everyone!" came the Doctor's voice. "Get to the sides!"

The Doctor wielded what appeared to be a very hastily cobbled together device. A metallic dish

protruded from its front; wires trailed out precariously from its reverse.

"Clarice, energise!"

The ice creatures closed on the Doctor's position. A sudden, intense whine emitted from the device. There was no visible expulsion of energy, no laser beam or particle bolt. Just the sound as the electromagnetic waves pulsed into the creatures' icy bodies. Still they approached, their arms outstretched...

... and then, they began to shatter. The joints of their limbs snapped apart. They fell to the floor, their prone forms liquefying, until soon, they were nothing but slush upon the floor.

"Get the medic in here now," ordered Styne. "Everyone, remove to the control room."

"That's dealt with them for now, but I doubt it will last long."

The Doctor paced around the control room, energised by the encounter with the creatures.

"The key is that artefact," he continued. "I need to see it, see what I can make of it. Only then might I have some idea what we're dealing with, and put a

stop to it. Cut these creatures off at the source."

"I agree, Doctor," said Stynes. "I'll assemble -"

"Of course, I could just take the TARDIS straight there," continued the Doctor, right over her, "but there's some kind of interference on this planet. Some variety of temporal energy, and it's making it difficult to home in on the location. I was able to follow Clarice's signal here, but since then, the energy disturbance has become almost opaque. I'll need to go there on foot, and since I don't know the way, I'll need an escort."

"Of course, Doctor" agreed Styne. "I'll have an expeditionary force assemble

"Although I'm sure you don't appreciate taking interlopers on military missions any more than I enjoy hanging out with soldiers, I must ask - oh. Right. An expeditionary force, excellent Commander."

"You're welcome, I'm sure."

The Doctor swung back round to the TARDIS.

"I'll just fetch my heavy coat. Don't want to catch a chill, now."

He disappeared back into the box. Stynes turned

on her heel and left via the opposite exit.

Clarice turned to Johan. "Is it just me, or is the Commander being exceptionally accommodating today?"

Stynes had insisted on a full force of six soldiers accompany the Doctor through the cave system. The route had been well recorded before the ice creatures had appeared, but no one had risked entering the caves since. Now, though, the icy caverns were distressingly quiet, save for the crunch of boots on frost.

The Doctor started humming an archaic vaudeville tune, just to jolly things up. He leant close to the burly individual who marched along to his left.

"Must be nearly there by now, eh?" he said to the soldier. "I'd say we've walked about a mile-and-a-half. Still, shouldn't complain, it's probably good for me. And this cold air is very bracing!" He took in a deep breath, and let it out noisily. "Ooh yes." He peered at the soldier's chestplate. "No name badge then? Any chance you'll tell me, or do I have to guess?"

"It's de Mose," replied the soldier gruffly.

"De Mose, wonderful to meet you," smiled the Doctor. "Quiet trip, isn't it? Funny how we've not bumped into any of those icy chaps, don't you think?"

"No," replied de Mose. "I don't think. Doesn't matter anyhow. We're there.

The cave route opened out into a wide cavern, in the middle of which stood what appeared to be an ice sculpture, five feet tall and entwined with elaborate loops and whirls. The light from the soldiers' torches reflected off it, sparkling in the darkness of the cavern itself.

"Interesting," said the Doctor, eyeing up the strange object. "No inscriptions that I can see, but there's something... yes, it's a little psychic, isn't it? I can almost taste it. No doubt created as some sort of beacon for whatever, or whomever, previously came to this planet."

"Very good, Doctor," said the leader of the group. "Men, switch to night vision. Lights off."

The cavern descended into pure blackness. The Doctor heard the sound of boots scraping as the

soldiers left, back out the way they came.

"Hmm. I did wonder why the Commander was being so helpful." The Doctor rummaged in his pockets bringing out his mobile phone. It provided some illumination, but the Doctor was disappointed to see it was still unable to penetrate the temporal energies that surrounded this planet.

"At least I can get a good look at this," he said, peering at the psychic artefact. "Although, if this does display telepathic activity, then whatever created presumably knows I'm here." The swung round, shining the light from his phone around the cavern in an attempt to examine his surroundings. It was enough to see the ice of the cavern walls bulging outwards. It creaked like snow underfoot as it formed into vaguely humanoid shapes. They emanated from all sides, blocking his escape in any direction.

"As my friend the Admiral once said, 'It's a trap!'"

The Doctor jabbed furiously at his phone, trying to boost the signal sufficiently to reach back to the TARDIS.

"Come on, come on, you ridiculous piece of kit...

yes!" He spoke into the device. "Oh come on, pick up... Yes, Master, can you hear me? I need you to home the TARDIS in on this signal, I'm trapped with -" An angry burst of static interrupted his speech. "Get help if you have to, but get the TARDIS here. And don't trust Stynes!" A high pitched whine signalled the sudden loss of signal. "Oh, marvellous. Isn't it always the way?"

The ice creatures surrounded the Doctor, their shapes a terrible pastiche of the human form. Their misshapen arms extended, their clawed hands slicing through the Doctor's clothes, coming into painful contact with his flesh. The cold bit into him, bringing his body temperature crashing down. The Doctor let out a gasp of pain. In front of him, an ice creature continued to shift its form, its lumpen face morphing into something more human, distinctly recognisable...

The Doctor found himself looking into a mirror. His own face stared back at him, the ice creature now inhabiting his own form.

The Doctor collapsed as his own face looked down on him, smiling.

The Master grappled with the controls of the TARDIS, trying in vain to triangulate the sub-etha telephonic signal that he had, all so briefly, intercepted.

"Blast!" he growled, losing the signal completely. "Why the Doctor insists on carting around this archaic model time capsule I simply do not understand. The indignity of being slaved to such a primitive device, it makes my blood boil. Or it would, if I had any." He drummed his fingers on the console. "Oh, what to do, what to do... If no signal can make it through that disturbance... except the one signal we already have a full lock on."

The Master activated the TARDIS' own communications system, tracing the radio band back across the signals previously received in the vicinity of this planet. Finally isolating the right one, he opened a channel.

"Hello? Hello? Is anyone receiving me?"

"This is Heimdall base receiving you, please respond, over," came a female voice.

"Good afternoon, my dear, this is... oh, call me Masters. I'm inside the Doctor's TARDIS."

"His what?"

"The blue box standing not ten feet away from you, do try to keep up. Listen to me; I can't leave the confines of the TARDIS and the Doctor is in peril. You clearly have a talent for communications technologies or you never would have reached us in the first place. Now, I need you to go and find the Doctor and boost his signal so that I can pilot the TARDIS to him. Is that understood?"

"I... I think so, but we can't go down into the caverns. You need a team. I'll get Commander Stynes, she can -"

"No," ordered the Master. "Don't let her know what's going on. I didn't get much from the Doctor but I know she can't be trusted, so make sure she isn't listening in on this and get to the Doctor yourselves. You'll be quite safe once as long as you can boost the signal sufficiently. TARDIS out."

Clarice closed the line. She turned to Johan, who stood to her side with a look of confusion on his face.

"Who the hell was that?" asked Johan.

"I'm not sure," replied Clarice, "but he's

obviously a friend of the Doctor. The Doctor needs our help."

"No chance!" Johan shook his head. "We are not going out there with those things running around."

"The ice creatures aren't out there right now! The microwave weapon destroyed them, at least for now. We'll be alright if we hurry." Clarice didn't quite believe herself, but knew she couldn't go on her own. "I've got Ezra's notes, we can follow the route to where the Doctor went."

"And then you can signal this box thing? The one that's right here, and it'll, what, come and pick us up?"

Clarice grabbed Johan by the shoulders. "Yes! I can do it, we can do it. The Doctor saved us from those things, and if he's going to stop them coming back, we need to save him right back!"

The Doctor awoke, his body seemingly weightless as he drifted in the inky blackness that surrounded him. He groped around in his mind for the memory of where he was, and found himself once more on the icy floor of the cave. It lacked sensation; no physical sense of the ground beneath

or his own weight bearing down. Only the intense cold.

He remembered. He had lost consciousness, forced himself to retreat inside his own mind for protection while his body went into torpor. He was still in the cave, of course, but this wasn't the true environment. He was inside his own mind, constructing the environment from his immediate experience.

"In that case," he said to himself, "I think something a little more homely is in order."

The dank cave vanished. A soft amber light suffused the area around him. Details faded into visibility: a green leather armchair, a small wooden table, towering bookcases. A cosy study, just the place to concentrate.

"Something missing... Ah!"

With a thought, a hatstand popped into existence. The Doctor flung his scarf and overcoat onto the nearest hook, a sat in the chair. The familiarity of the environment gave some sense of comfort, the dim light an illusion of warmth, but the biting cold was still there, painfully niggling at his

neurons.

"Come on then," the Doctor sighed. "I can feel that you're here. Show yourself, whoever you are."

"Who indeed, Doctor," came the reply, in a voice identical to his own.

His assailant appeared before him, sporting the same face as him. He was robed in black and sported a top hat, something that the Doctor himself could certainly envisage himself wearing.

"I like your tailor," said the Doctor to his visitor. "Although I think it lacks creativity to steal someone else's look so brazenly."

The individual laughed, a harsh, mirthless bark.

"I think you have this situation entirely the wrong way round, Doctor."

The Doctor grimaced, and materialised a second chair for his guest. Despite the lack of true physicality in this subconscious realm, he made the effort to give him a stiff wooden chair, as uncomfortable as he could imagine, with too-short legs and a back at entirely the wrong angle.

"Please, sit down," said the Doctor. "Make yourself at home." A tea set appeared on the table.

The Doctor picked up the pot, but, realising that it would do nothing to actually warm him up, turned it into a carafe of red wine.

"Châteauneuf-du-Pape, 2057," he said. "Might as well take advantage of the cellar when my imagination is the limit."

"Oh, excellent, the pointless banter part of the exchange," sneered his guest. "How long must we spend on this? I have been waiting rather a long time for you to show your face. Or should I say, my face?"

The Doctor sipped heavily at his glass. "Fine, enough with the pleasantries. You've clearly gone to contrived and dubious lengths to get me here. I take it the attacks on the colony were purely to draw me in? Rather a convoluted way to go about it. You could have just pinged me a text."

"I had hoped your superiors would have directed you here, but it seems this little outpost isn't important enough to warrant their attention. Nonetheless, its location on a weak point in space/time made it ideal for my entry into this continuum. Unfortunately, manifesting fully wasn't

possible until I had you in close proximity. So I instructed Stynes send out a distress call, or I would dispose of her entire populace."

"All that, just so you could pop into my subconscious for a chinwag?"

The being smiled thinly. "Not quite. I have something rather grander in mind."

The Doctor drained his glass and slammed it back onto the table.

"Out with it then," he demanded of his doppelgànger. "Just who are you, and why this particular interest in me?"

"I don't suppose you would recognise me," replied the visitor. "We met some considerable time ago, from your perspective. I am known as the Great Intelligence."

The Doctor raised his eyes to the ceiling."Oh, good grief. You're *still hanging around, causing trouble,* are you? I thought I'd dealt with you *several regenerations ago."*

'That was but one aspect *of my consciousnessreplied the* Intelligence. "This is the form I *prefer to use, that of my original* corporeal host. One

that I impressed *upon you as I entered this* reality."

"Come again?" The Doctor did not like *where this conversation was* going. "Are you seriously claiming responsibility *for this?" He* materialised a handheld mirror. "I am *particularly fond of this face.* Cute, sexy, and lick the mirror handsome."

"Oh, please don't," muttered the Intelligence. "As *it happens, that* is exactly the case. I was forced to escape *another branch of the* timeline and found myself here. A damaged point *in space/time* that intersected your own timestream. I *had* to *engineer your* coming here so that I could arrive here in full, but now that you are here, my influence on you stretches throughout *your existence.* Retroactively, of course, but simple linearity is *something I* overcame long ago. I influenced your current physical *form at the* moment of your regeneration, purely so that you *would become* the perfect vessel for me once I finally had you in *my grasp."*

"I see," said the Doctor. "And you really expect me to *believe all* this? You're little more than a phantasm. Just an ego searching *for* an id. I've been wiping the floor with beings like you since I *left*

Gallifrey."

"And now the hyperbole!" The Intelligence rose, looming over the Doctor, identical eyes boring into each other. "You talk the *talk*, Doctor, but what are you capable of, really? I've been watching you, up and down this timeline. An errand boy for your masters, scuttling along in your box with your tin man at your side. Time for a show tune. Doctor? Just off to do something *eccentric? You're a* parody of yourself. You aren't even aware that, as *we've been*talking, I have embedded myself deeply into your biodata. You'll be mine in... oh, about six minutes, I should estimate."

The Doctor looked up at his own face, mulling over the information.

"Well," he said, finally. "Just enough time for another glass."

"He's here!" Clarice cried out, as her torchlight illuminated the prone body of the Doctor. Frost was forming on his deathly pale skin. His breathing was so shallow as to be barely visible.

Johan trudged up behind her. He took in the sight of the Doctor and put a hand on Clarice's

shoulder.

"I think we're too late," he said, quietly.

Clarice pulled an intercom from her belt, adjusting the frequency until she received a response. The Doctor's microwave device was slung over her back on a makeshift strap, hooked up to the intercom with brightly coloured cables. She activated the device, surging its remaining power through the intercom's battery. She put the receiver to her face, tucking it into her padded hood to so that her voice would make it through.

"Masters, can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, my dear," came the cultured tones of the Doctor's friend. "Have you found him?"

"We have, but... I think we might be too late. He's frozen, I don't think he'll last long enough to get back to the base."

"We don't need the base, and the Doctor is far harder to kill than you might think. Believe me, I know from experience. Now, boost the signal as much as you can. I need a strong pulse to home in on

"OK - I can boost the power some more for a

short time but it'll burn the battery out pretty quickly. You'll need to lock onto us in a few seconds."

"Nothing simpler, my dear."

Clarice worked as quickly as her cold-numbed fingers would allow.

A sudden whine from the intercom signalled the surge in power.

"Come on, come on..." she muttered.

"Clarice," said Johan, "how long before -"

He was cut off by the sudden burst of sparks that flew from the intercom unit. Clarice yelped and dropped the device. It sat inert on the ice.

"Damn it..." she murmured, before a faint noise began to emanate from all around her. Growing in intensity, that same groaning noise that signalled the Doctor's appearance before filled the cavern. Around them, subtle shapes began to appear, gradually becoming bolder and more real until they were no longer in the cave, but within a broad room in which a dark-clad man stood at a circular days.

"Welcome aboard, my dear." He turned to face Clarice, and raised an eyebrow quizzically. "And

you brought a friend, I see. How quaintly human of you."

"We got the Doctor to you," said Johan, "now it's down to you." "No, you got me to the Doctor," pointed out the Master with pedantically, "Simply being within the TARDIS will help him considerably, but he won't regain consciousness without help. I suppose it is in my hands now." He crouched down by the Doctor's body, bringing himself to the same level as Clarice.

"Can you wake him up?" she asked.

"I believe so." The Master extended a hand and slapped the Doctor harshly around the face. "Wake up!"

The Doctor groaned as he regained consciousness. "Was that entirely necessary?"

"I was merely lending assistance Doctor, although I don't deny there was a certain level of satisfaction involved."

The Doctor sat up on the floor. "Clarice, Johan - what are you doing here?"

"We're the ones who found you," stated Clarice.

"That is quite so, Doctor," admitted the Master. "I

couldn't have done it without them."

"Well, thank you all for your help," said the Doctor, "but I need to put myself back under. There is an intelligence at work here, trying to subsume my identity. It's still active in my mind. It will be easier for me to fight it while unconscious, so that I can focus all my energies on the task." He faced the Master. "This planet is on the cusp of a space/time disturbance. I need you to pilot the TARDIS right into the heart of it."

"Whatever for?" replied the android.

"Now that I'm here. I'm fully linked to the TARDIS through its telepathic circuits. We can work together and give this usurper a run for his money." He paused in thought for a moment. "Oh, and would one of you please fetch me a hot water bottle?"

"Ah, there you are, Doctor" sneered the Intelligence. The familiar figure turned around - as did another, and another, and another.

"I am expanding to fill your mind, Doctor," gloated the being.

"Every facet of your being will become as me."

"You really do go on, don't you?" complained the Doctor. "If you're really so powerful, then why am I still here at all? I just woke up - why did you allow me even that brief respite? If I were you, I'd be holding onto this place tight."

"Very soon, you will be me." The facets of the Great Intelligence surrounded the Doctor. "It's time to give in."

"You forget," said the Doctor, with quiet confidence. "I am a Time Lord. The ninth in a long line of incarnations. I am the Doctor, and with me, come all of me!"

With extreme concentration, the Doctor summoned up the aspects of his own self. Eight other men appeared in the mental environment. They surrounded the Intelligence as it surrounded the Doctor. They straightened their lapels, loosened their cravats and rolled up their ruffled sleeves. The Doctor smiled.

"Sick 'em, boys."

The ghosts of the Doctor's past selves tore into the phantoms of the Intelligence, pulling them to the ground and tearing their ethereal bodies into mist.

As quickly as they were destroyed they reformed, but the Doctors' defences were relentless. The Doctor, his core self, reached deeper into his mind still, searching for the link he needed.

"There you are, old girl," he said, mentally grabbing hold of the TARDIS' metaphorical hand. "Into the Axis!"

The Doctor, riding upon the spirit of the TARDIS, searched through the myriad worlds. He saw himself, in many forms and with many faces. He saw his previous self regenerate time and time again, into a multitude of men and women; soldiers, peacemakers, explorers and romantics. He saw his other selves fight the Intelligence in its many aspects, again and again with many friends by his side. One of them bore an astonishing resemblance to Clarice, but the Doctor could not allow himself time to dwell on this mystery. He pushed at the moment of his regeneration, where his connection to space and time was strongest, splintering a baby universe off into the manifold of possibilities. A tiny, pocket reality, in which a shadow of his being could reside.

"Bring him here," he ordered his mental defences. The avatars of his earlier selves dragged the kicking, gnashing form of the Intelligence as it coalesced back into one spectral body. Together, every aspect of the Doctor forced the being through the split in the timeline.

The Doctor severed the link and closed the doors of possibility behind him.

"Good work me," he smiled. "Time to wake up."

"He's awake!"

Clarice scurried over to the Doctor, who sat up with a broad grin on his face.

"Someone fetch me a very strong coffee and my inhaler," he demanded. "That was the most exhausting sleep I've ever had."

"You managed to banish the creature?" asked the Master, watching warily from the console.

"Of course. Did you ever doubt it?"

"What happened?" asked Clarice. "We've just been waiting for you to wake up."

"If you want the simple version, an alien intelligence was trying to take over my body and use me as its vessel on the material plane.

It came here from another branch of my timestream; I shunted it off into yet another. A little dead end I cooked up in my head; a parody universe to draw its attention. It should last long enough to stop him from escaping back here again. I've left a little trick or two there."

"Very good. Doctor," said the Master. "But rest assured I shall be watching you, in case of any lingering influence from this being. "

'Excellent. I knew you'd come in useful someday."

"Sorry," interjected Johan, "but what about the base? There's still a bunch of ice monsters threatening the colony."

"Do try to keep up," said the Doctor. "Those creatures were animated by the Intelligence. Just blunt instruments used to create a situation. They'll rapidly collapse back to slush without any psychic influence." He got to his feet and trotted over to the console. "Now, I believe we left that rather brusque commander in charge down there. I'm not sure she's the best bet to keep that colony going. I'll just send a quick memo off to Fleet Admiral Travers at Earth

HQ. I'll let him know the situation on Heimdall, and there won't be any lightspeed lag to worry about either. He'll get the colony back on track. He owes me a favour, anyway."

"Why?" asked Clarice. "Did you save him from some alien monsters as well?"

"No. As it happens," replied the Doctor. "I introduced him to his wife." The Doctor flipped a few switches on the TARDIS console, and turned back to Clarice and Johan. "Now, what do I do with you two? I had said to myself that I wouldn't be picking up any more waifs and strays, but given that you did save my life down there... how about I take you for a quick spin in the TARDIS before dropping you back on Heimdall?"

"Do you mean it?" asked Clarice.

A quick spin where?" said Johan in a more concerned tone."Let's find out!" replied the Doctor, and pitched the TARDIS into flight.

"Marvellous," sighed the Master, sardonically.

Across a divide in no-space, in a pocket universe, an iteration of the Doctor arrived on the planet Terserus, an iteration of the Master following in his

stead. Across the infinite array of possible worlds, the two Time Lords, in some form or another, remained linked, as either valued companions or deadliest enemies. In this particular universe, the Doctor, in his ninth life and accompanied by his fiancée, faced death once more.

The Great Intelligence broke into this pocket universe at the moment of this regeneration. Weakened by the psychic battle with the Doctor of its previous universe, the formless entity entered the new Doctor's being at that brief moment when space and time were weakened by the surge in Artron energy.

It had won. The Doctor had forced it out of one timestream and straight into another, at the exact point it could do the most damage to the Doctor of this new reality. The Intelligence moulded the new Doctor's appearance, once again remaking the Time Lord in its own image.

Instantly, it was trapped. The Doctor's telepathic warning to his alter ego in the pocket universe triggered an immediate, deliberate regeneration.

"I think in my new body I'm going to be

particularly good at rewiring," joked the new Doctor, frying his brand new nervous system with electrical energy. Another regeneration ensued, the sudden rush of Artron energy annihilating the weakened Intelligence. The barest embers of its psychic form clung on.

Another regeneration might be called for to fully purge the evil being. It was a sacrifice worth making, to save the Doctor that had instigated this pocket reality.

It wouldn't be the end. Even the universe couldn't bear to be without the Doctor. Or that universe. Or that one. Or the one beyond that...

SLEEPER AWAKES

SCOTT CLARINGBOLD

Rich Grant heard the tell-tale click of the large grey wall clock, as the numbers flipped over to nine a.m.

He opened his eyes, and was not surprised to find himself sat behind his desk in Cubicle 9. The overhead lights flickered, causing him to wince as his pupils adjusted.

As usual, there was no memory of getting to work this morning. A side effect of the 'de-clutter procedure.'

The work here was so secretive that the owners demanded their employees memories wiped. This

was partly to allow the employees to use their brains to full capacity, and partly to ensure none defected to rival companies.

Although, why would anyone want to work somewhere else? The pay here was very rewarding. 'Or is it?' Rich thought. 'I don't really remember.'

One thing he was certain of was that he travelled to work on the number 22 from Clapham Common. At least, the image of that bus was buried in his head.

He was also sure he was on intimate terms with a woman named Alison. A woman - a bit younger than him - with beautiful mocha skin. Rich was also slightly worried that he may be some sort of cuckold husband, as he had memories of a tall, bearded man who liked to be called Master.

Rich shuddered at the thought.

He heard the rustling of paper from other cubicles, and light chatter from further along the floor.

With a heavy sigh. Rich picked up his pen and began to rummage through the pile of blueprints on his desk.

His boss- David Alan Ross - was an innovator. He looked for everyday domestic problems that blighted humanity, and he got his teams to solve them. This was easy enough when it was something like a hand-held vacuum cleaner. It was a bit more difficult when it was trying to solve the theory behind time travel, which was Rich's current task.

Rich stroked at his chin as he wrote something down on his pad - Artron energy. What was Artron energy? He didn't remember having studied that at university. Then again, Rich didn't remember going to any university.

Something was bothering him. Deep down, he felt as if he may be a naturally inquisitive man but something was shackling him to this place, to this time. Time seemed important to Rich. Not in an anxious way, but in a way that did not confine him.

Rich caught his reflection in the computer screen before him. He was tall, thin, with a sallow complexion. His dark hair had flashes of silver at the temples. Somehow, he knew he hadn't always looked like this.

He heard footsteps outside his cubicle. The

authoritative voice of Miss Foster herded the new recruits along. Rich looked up over the top of the cubicle.

A tall girl, with red hair - and impossibly long legs - looked around the building. She appeared to be making mental notes. Behind her, a nervous looking young man in medical scrubs followed.

Now that he looked at the girl a little more closely, Rich noticed that her attire - a checked blouse and denim shorts - was perhaps not the best choice for office wear.

The girl smiled at Rich. He tried to smile back but his jaw ached almost immediately. He got the impression that perhaps he wasn't used to smiling a lot.

He had a memory of someone telling him that your jaw would ache from all the smiling for wedding photos.

Where had he heard that? His own wedding to Alison. No, wait, was that the answer or another question?

Rich looked down - no wedding ring. He and Alison spent long periods of time together though.

Perhaps they were just partners. Maybe they were just casual lovers, shared by the bloke they called Master.

Did his day go like this everyday? After the de-clutter. How did he get any work done when his mind was full of all these questions.

The hunch-shouldered slouch in the scrubs sprang to attention, sensing that Rich was staring at the red-haired girl. The tousle-haired man narrowed his eyes, trying to look menacing. Rich thought that scrubs-boy looked about as scary as a wet sock puppet.

Miss Foster moved past Rich's cubicle. She looked in and nodded politely, before whisking off her recruits.

Rich went back to the blue-prints. Swirling hieroglyph-type icons adorned the paperwork. It was a language that Rich felt he could decipher if he concentrated hard enough.

He looked up at the clock, time had gone rather quickly. Too quickly, in fact. Surely, he had just sat down to start work but the time-piece was telling him it was nearly time for lunch.

The thought of having to go upstairs to the canteen filled Rich with dread. It was usually very busy. Full of annoying people.

But he told himself that he really needed the time away from his desk. He looked down at his desk, it was quite untidy. Piles of blue-prints were stacked haphazardly, almost blocking Rich's view of the office.

Something was very wrong here. Rich had no clear memory of doing any of this work, or of any time passing at all.

Perhaps he would need to discuss it with his boss.

♦

Rich sat alone in the canteen, pushing the food around his plate with a large silver fork. As he predicted, the room was full.

Despite the volume of people it was quiet, groups sat at desks, talking in hushed tones. Looking up every now and again to see if anyone was listening, they would duck their heads back down and return to their conversation.

Rich was happy to sit here alone. Was that the

kind of man he was? A loner.

At the far end of the room sat a table of men, squabbling over something. Some were dressed in modern - if slightly eccentric -clothing, while others wore garish clothes that would make them stick out like sore thumbs on the street.

Rich had heard somewhere that they were called The Eggheads. The name Rich had for them ended in the word 'heads'.

One of the men looked up. Rich looked away quickly, trying not to make any eye contact. The man was getting to his feet though, his chair legs scraping across the polished tile floor.

Rich pushed a fork of food into his mouth as the newcomer plonked himself down, without asking if the chair was taken. How rude.

This man was different to the other Eggheads. He wore a black u-boat type leather jacket, over a maroon t-shirt, together with black trousers and shoes.

'Hullo!" the man said in a cheery greeting. Rich placed the man's accent as being from the north of England. Lancashire, possibly Mancunian.

Rich looked up at the man - who beamed back at him. A large lop-sided grin sat underneath a big nose, to the side of his face were ears that looked as if his head had forgotten to grow in to them. If anyone had tried to draw a caricature of this man then they would really struggle, Rich thought.

"You been here long?" The man asked. Then he held up a hand, "No, sorry, daft question. What with the..."

"De-clutter procedure." Rich finished. As far as he was aware this was the first time he had spoken today and his voice alarmed him. It was a confident voice, with clear annunciation, and an almost aristocratic lilt to it.

"I'm the Doctor." The man said, holding out a meaty paw.

"Doctor who?" Rich replied.

The man looked confused. "Eh?"

Rich sighed, placed his fork down, and sat back, crossing his arms over his chest. "I assume you're all Doctor's up on that table. It must be confusing if you just call each other Doctor."

The man nodded, "Good logic. Well done."

Rich tutted.

The man, who was known as the Doctor, fell silent for a minute. Rich was hoping he would take the hint and push off back to the table of nut-cases.

The man leaned forward, lowering his voice. "We're made of the same stuff, you and I." The Doctor said, almost cryptically. "Don't let them grind you down. You're one of us, in some capacity." With that the Doctor got up and walked back to the Egghead's table. As he sat down, he glanced back at Rich and nodded, before sitting down to rejoin the heated argument currently raging between his associates.

"The same?" Rich muttered. "I highly doubt that."

A klaxon sounded, and all the chattering ceased immediately. The only sound in the canteen was the scraping of chair legs on the tiled floor.

Rich stood up and followed the others back to work.

* * *

On the fringes of The Outer Rim, a sleek space-

fighter blurred into existence. The female pilot checked various dials, flicked a number of switches, and caressed several dials, before settling back into the shaped seat.

She had purloined this ship from an inter-dimensional bounty hunter, purely for its hyper-dimensional engine.

The woman fished a small black box from her backpack. A red light flashed intermittently, an S.O.S. from the Doctor.

At least, she thought it must be the Doctor. She had only given two people the distress frequency code, and now one of them was dead.

She ran a hand through her cropped, mousey-brown hair and checked the dials again. The stars around her began to distort, space folded in on itself and swirled, likes clothes in a washing machine. The woman wondered when was the last time she had used a conventional washing machine? Now her clothes were steam-cleaned in an instant. Travelling in time and space could have its advantages.

She was constantly on the move these days, much like her mentor. Various alien races wanted

the knowledge in her head. She travelled from A to B via Z - and sometimes back again - just to leave a false, tangled trail.

"Always take the scenic route." The Doctor had told her.The woman checked the console again and the ship dissolved into the dark void of space.

* * *

Rich was thinking about the man with the big ears. They were the same. What had he meant? Surely that man was the pint of lager and packet of pork scratchings type. While Rich sort of remembered that he preferred the refined things in life.

He shrugged and looked at the work on the desk in front of him. Another several sheets of paper were full with his writing. Again, he couldn't remember doing it.

Rich sat back and picked up the mug of tea. Tea. He knew this was something he had always enjoyed. Everything felt right with a cup of tea in his hand.

He heard the motorised whirring of his boss's wheelchair, and Dave Alan Ross poked his head

around the cubicle wall.

"Hello, Rich." Dave rasped.

Rich smiled and greeted the man. Dave Ross had built an empire - Darlex Industries - and a vast fortune but none of it had been able to help him after the accident. Fire had consumed his whole body, burning him beyond recognition. Leaving him near death. However, he had defied the odds and fought back from the brink. "How's things coming on with the time travel machine?"

"Erm.. I think we're making great progress." Rich lied. He didn't have a clue how the project was going.

Dave nodded and drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. "Excellent. I look forward to seeing the results at your monthly appraisal." His voice rose in decibels, until he almost screamed the last few words.

Dave waved as he wheeled himself out of the cubicle. Rich glanced up at the wall clock. It was nearly finishing time.

* * *

The craft touched down and the pilot surveyed the scenery outside of the ship, just as the Doctor used to do. She had picked up so many mannerisms and habits from him during their short, few years together.

She had to admit that she had missed him. It had been so long and she wondered what he looked like now. He couldn't possibly still be her Doctor.

She descended the metal ramp, a laser rifle in hand; it didn't hurt to be prepared. After all, she couldn't be certain that this wasn't some sort of trap.

She kicked the earth with her foot and a splash of brown clay-like mud spattered her boot. No enemies rushed her. In fact, apart from her, the wrist scanner was only picking up one other life form in the near vicinity.

Taking a deep breath, the woman crept towards a large domed building ahead. It was built from the clay earth.

The sky was dark, any stars were too far away to give off much light, and the nearest moon seemed to be obscured by hundreds of craft. Perhaps it was a space port.

She tried to think of where she could be, but nothing obvious came to mind. The woman entered the building, her gun pointed in front of her, ready to vaporise any assailant.

The sight before her took her breath away. She put a hand to her mouth in horror.

Someone had blown a TARDIS inside out. The interior panels, with the roundels, were scattered in random patterns around the building. Wires and circuit boards lay, or hung, connected by thick pipes. In the middle of the chaos was the central console column, containing the time rotor. Her eyes settled on the figure draped above it, almost Christ-like in appearance. The outward appearance of the man seemed to be that of a man in his forties. If it was the Doctor, she knew he was closer to eight hundred years old. It was still the man she had travelled with and looked up to, however much his appearance had altered.

As if awoken by her thoughts, the man opened his eyes. Bedraggled brown hair plastered his forehead and face. The Doctor's eyes fell upon the woman and he smiled.

"Look at you, all grown up, my dear Ace." He croaked.

Ace moved gingerly towards the Doctor. "Professor, what the hell is going on?" Now that she was nearer she could see that the Doctor's shirt had been torn away, a tattered neckerchief still clung to his neck. Wires were connected to his hands and feet, a crown of metal spikes was attached to his head. Flashes of energy lit up from the rotor, engulfing the Doctor and was then siphoned off by the crown.

"Don't come any closer." The Doctor said, wearily.

"But you've called me to help." Ace called up to the Doctor.

The Doctor shook his head. "Time's out of line, Ace. This isn't how I regenerate. Something is trying to steal all of my knowledge."

"For what purpose, Professor?"

The Doctor winced, "Did that little chap with the hat really let you get away with calling him that?"

The woman laughed, "Yeah, not that he had much of a choice." It felt odd referring to the Doctor

in the third person.

The time rotor spat another burst of energy in to the air. "Someone's stealing the old girls energy."

"Why me? From all of the companions you've had..."

The Doctor tried to laugh but the sound caught in his throat and he coughed instead. Gathering his composure he looked down at Ace with admiration. "Ace, you're the only one to take on a Dalek with a baseball bat."

The woman grinned. "I've done much more to those tin-pots since then, Doc." She waved an arm around her. "What happened to the TARDIS?"

"The end product of a little project, and the end of this body."

Ace looked up at the man, sorrow in her eyes. "You said this isn't how you regenerate."

"No, but it will be if we can't rectify the time-lines I will die here.

I'm an anomaly, Ace. Time fractures around me, spawning multiple ninth incarnations of me. All the Doctor, but not quite."

"What do you need me to do?"

* * *

The wall clock clicked to nine a.m.- again. Rich opened his eyes. Had he been home? He wasn't sure any more. For all he knew, he was switched off and packed away in the cleaning cupboard at night.

A mug of warm tea sat next to him. Bloody de-cluttering process! It was robbing him of his life, of Alison, of his... whatever else he had. Another pile of papers sat in his in-tray, he yawned and scratched at his chin. A beard! Oh no... he didn't do beards. He knew that for sure.

Something wasn't right here. He felt like a prisoner in this building, as if he was being interrogated; his mind emptied of information. Miss Foster entered with the new batch of recruits. Rich chose to ignore them today. From the corner of his eye he was aware of someone looking at him.

Perhaps they would just go away.

A female cough tried to catch his attention. Rich turned to look at her. A pretty woman looked back at him. She wore a black dress and thick red tights. A pair of heavy black boots on her feet.

"Hey, Professor." She greeted Rich.

Something fired in the back of Rich's head. An old memory struggled to make itself known. The way the woman had spoken to him was familiar. Did he know her? If so, where from?

"I'm not a professor." Rich replied.

The girl shrugged, "Whatever you say, Professor. You've still got a big brain in that head of yours. Even if you have changed bodies." Changed bodies. As mad as that sounded, something inside Rich was screaming at him to listen.

Rich looked either side of the cubicle, when he was satisfied that no-one was listening he moved closer to the woman. "You know me?"

The woman nodded, "Well, I knew one of you."

"One of me? What are you blathering about?"

Ace smiled at the man. "You don't belong here. It's a trap and you're being held against your will."

Rich noticed the serious look on the woman's face, and burst into laughter. "Good one, nice to meet you, miss... in fact no it isn't, bugger off and bother someone else. Fitz down on the left there might like you."

The woman shook her head, fiddled with the neckline on her dress and produced a silver key with a strange pattern on its head. "Recognise this?"

Rich looked at the key, he could have sworn that it was glowing a bright blue. The voice in his head was starting to break through. It wasn't conventional words, it was a whispering of equations, of cosmic events."

"The... TARDIS." Rich said.

Ace nodded, "You remember?"

At that moment there was a whirring behind Ace. She turned to find Dave Ross behind her.

"Ah, a new recruit. Allow me to show you around the facility, my dear."

Ace stood back, "I'm sorry. I wandered in here and bothered this gentleman, I was looking for the toilets."

Dave Ross gave a knowing nod, a sneer played in on his lips. As if he didn't believe a word Ace was saying. "This way. We must leave Mister Grant to get on with his very important work."

"Perhaps I could shadow, Mister Grant. I might be able to help him."

Rich nodded. "You know, Dave I could actually do with some help. Miss..."

"McShane. Dorothy McShane." Ace said, holding out a hand.

Rich shook it. "Miss McShane here has just pointed out that I'm slightly out on some of my calculations. I think her assistance may be of some benefit."

Dave waved a hand. "This is highly irregular, but Rich is the lynch-pin in my operation here." He seemed to mull over Rich's request and then, waving a hand, he rolled away in his chair, "Fine. McShane reports to you Rich."

As he disappeared, Ace turned to Rich, "Don't take this the wrong way, mate, but I'm not an assistant or a companion."

There was something about Ace that Rich liked. More than that. Her strong-will was a quality that was going to come in useful.

"Tell me everything you know." Ace said.

* * *

Rich explained everything to Ace. How he would start his day at nine every morning. How his work would be done, with no memory of having done it. Of Alison.

Ace nodded encouragement. Rich wanted to know more about his past about how Ace knew him. Definitely all about this changing bodies.

"You're a Time Lord." Ace said, as if that should explain everything to Rich. Perhaps he had been hasty to believe her. Maybe she was a nutter.

"Awha...?"

"Look, you have no memory of having been outside this facility. How do you know there is an outside?" Ace said.

Rich looked at her with bewilderment. "Don't be so preposterous, of course there is an outside. Just because I can't remember it doesn't mean it's not there."

Ace smiled, "Just because you don't remember being a Time Lord doesn't mean you aren't one."

This girl was good, she obviously had had a really good role model. Rich felt a slight stab of pride, perhaps she had been his friend in a past life,

she certainly seemed to have very sound logic.

Rich sat forward and fixed the girl with a stern look. "Alright, I have one burning question." Ace raised an eyebrow, waiting for him to expand. "Tell me that none of my other incarnations have ever had a beard."

Ace let out a laugh and shook her head. "Maybe one has, but the others definitely haven't."

Rich sat back, scratching at his chin. "Jolly good, I was thinking I was going to have to keep this. So, what do we do now?"

Ace dug a hand into her backpack and took out a sleek, silver tube. Rich thought it looked like a fountain pen, but a bit fatter.

The woman handed it over to him, "This, is usually the answer to most of your questions. Your sonic screwdriver."

Rich took the object in his hands, rolling it between his palms. It was quite light. His sonic screwdriver! A myriad images washed through his brain, fantastic creatures, aliens, machines, all falling to the might of the sonic screwdriver.

He stood up, placed his hands on the desk, and

swiped everything in to the air. "I'm a bloody Time Lord, no one can keep me locked up in this hell-hole."

Ace was glad that he was looking, and sounding, more like her friend. "Nice one, Prof."

"Come along, Ace. We have work to do." Ace watched as the Doctor charged off at a fast pace.

* * *

The Doctor was now wearing a heavy Edwardian overcoat, trimmed in red with a green cloak. Ace caught sight of him and thought that he looked like a cosplay Sherlock Holmes - minus the deerstalker.

"Nice threads."

The man before her took hold of the coat lapels between his thumbs and forefingers. "Thank you, my dear Dorothy. One has to look at his best when saving the universe." Ace could see that Rich was now gone. This was The Doctor.

They were walking past the other cubicles. Loud chattering started to follow them along the department. Heads bobbed up, nodding a greeting.

Familiar faces mouthing words of support.

Ace knew some of the people, but most were strangers. They all seemed to know the Doctor though.

The two adventurers pushed through the double doors, out into the corridor. Ace was used to the Doctor taking control, of having a plan. She had to remind herself that this regeneration wasn't quite finished. He might need a little push in the right direction.

"Where to?" The Doctor asked.

Ace pointed at the stairs. "The basement."

The Doctor raised an eyebrow, his forehead wrinkling in puzzlement. The basement? Why?"

"Because that's usually where the scary things lurk."

"But there's a perfectly good elevator here."

Ace shook her head, trying to surpress a smirk. "Don't be daft. Elevators can be stopped between floors, we could be trapped for hours."

The Doctor nodded, and tried to make out that he had been giving Ace a little test. "Quite. Well done, you have learned a lot from me."

They began the long walk down eight flights of stairs, to the ground floor. The Doctor wanted to open the doors to every floor, but Ace stopped him. Partly because they didn't have time to explore the whole building, and partly because she was scared at what they might find. It was convenient that there were eight floors - for eight previous Doctors.

His transformation was complete. Rich was gone. The Doctor was stalking down the stairs, hands clasped behind his back, enjoying every second and wondering what was going on.

* * *

A familiar motorised sound woke the eighth Doctor from his unconscious state. Davros rolled in to view, several golden Daleks behind him.

The beings voice reverberated around the room, a snarling scream. "What have you done, Doctor?"

The Doctor glowered down at his enemy. "I've called for the best companion I could think of."

Davros was seething. His fingers drumming the control panel *of* chair. "You've turned against your

own principles. Throwing people into alternate time-lines, trying to change history."

"No Davros!" The Doctor shouted, even Davros seemed surprised by the anger. "You left me no choice. You've perverted my regenerations leaving me with alternate ninth incarnations. I know what you're planning. To make one of my incarnations your slave, to change the outcome of the Time War. To exterminate all universes. You're a despotic old fool. Ace and my future self will stop you."

Davros began to chuckle, a low sound that grew into a rumble.

"This is one time that you will not defeat us. Doctor. After all you didn't think we would come to war without a secret weapon did you?'

"What? What weapon."

"Patience, my dear old enemy. You will find out in your next life."

Davros spun his chair around and trundled off. The Doctor shouted and screamed behind him.

* * *

"Ah, here we are, Ace." The Doctor said as they reached the ground floor. "Perhaps we should talk strategy before we make our way to the basement."

Ace tugged at her back-pack, removing a white cannister. "I've got your strategy right here, Professor."

Realising what the cannister held, the Doctor couldn't help but smile. "Nitro-nine. You haven't changed a bit."

"Isn't this all a bit too easy? I would have expected to see someone else on the stairs in a building this size." Ace looked at the Doctor. "Or at least some security guards." The Doctor replied, his lips curling into a smile. "Come along, Ace."

The two friends began the descent into the basement. They kept as quiet as possible, communicating with raised eyebrows, and hand signals.

The light was dim, a spectral, orange glow emanating from somewhere further back in the basement.

Apart from that, everything seemed quite normal.

The Doctor bounced forward, totally in his element, this was a mystery that needed solved. He laced his hands behind his back and headed towards the orange glow.

Ace took up the rear, keeping a watchful eye for a possible attack. The Doctor stood before a large, lead cabinet, ten feet high by five feet wide. The heat that came from it was just bearable. Ace was reminded of the time she had visited New York, the humid heat had hit her as soon as she stepped out of the TARDIS.

The Doctor took hold of the door handle and pulled it open. Inside was the image of a man, orange fire curling around his body and blasting in to the air.

"What is it?" Ace asked, appalled by the sight.

"Not what, who?" The Doctor replied.

"Well done, Doctor." An electronically modified voice hissed behind him.

The Doctor and his companion swung round to see the owner of the voice.

"Davros!" Ace spat, as if the name was poison on her tongue. The Dalek creator gurgled, a mirthful

chuckle that was irritating to both Ace and the Doctor. "I told you that you would find out my secret weapon in your next life."

The Doctor looked pained, a look of anger flashed across his pale face. "What you have done is despicable. Taking a regenerating Time Lord out of the time-line at the exact moment of his transformation.

"A stroke of genius." Davros retorted, his third eye glowing an intense bright blue. "What better way to alter the outcome of the Time War than to ensure that the War Doctor never existed." "And me? Where do I fit in?" The Doctor asked, flexing his fingers, curling his hands in to fists.

"A happy side effect of my scientific efforts. A side-step. A by-product. I believe the humans may say 'an also-ran'."

Ace watched as the electronic words hit the Doctor, like a cosmic sledge-hammer. His shoulders sagged, as if an invisible burden was now resting on them. The colour had drained from his already pasty face. The confident air was gone. For a moment the Doctor looked unsure of himself. A million

questions racing through his brain, trying to make sense of his being.

"Ignore him, Professor. You're still the Doctor regardless of how you got there." Ace pleaded with her friend.

"Quite right, I'm not the first regeneration to fall in between the rankings and I won't be the last. You can't intimidate me Davros, I'm the Doctor."

Ace stepped forward clutching the can of Nitro-nine. "Let's take him out, Doctor."

"Steady, Ace. We're obviously out of the time stream here. We can't destroy Davros without knowing how it would affect our time-lines."

Again, Davros barked a laugh that made Ace shudder. She could see the spittle on his lips as a black tongue flicked out, relishing the moment. "It won't affect your time-line at all. Doctor. You don't have one. You're not the only 'ninth' version I have created.

There's another couple running amok in the universe, oblivious that they're simply pawns in my game."

* * *

The eighth Doctor hung on his platform, waiting for the end to come. "This isn't how it ends. I'm supposed to be on Karn."

The sound of footsteps roused him from his melancholy. The Doctor could make out an outline of a figure, but the newcomer was staying silent for the moment.

"Who's there?" The Doctor rasped, his throat bone dry.

An old friend." The voice said.

The Doctor recognised the voice immediately. The Master.

"It pains me to see you like this. Only because I'm not the reason for your suffering, you understand." The Master said.

The Doctor looked down to see the almost reptilian eyes of The Master glaring back at him. "You?"

"Me. Despite our differences I did appreciate the sentiment that you would grant my request to return my remains to Gallifrey, Doctor."

"An obvious trap in hindsight."

"Yes, hindsight is a wonderful thing." The Master skipped around the ramshackle floorboards of the TARDIS.

"How are you here?"

"Come now, Doctor The Daleks will exterminate me for my crimes against them. I decided a little sojourn out of the time-stream was in order." The Master stood directly below the Doctor now.

The Doctor was wheezing quite badly, exhausted as the Artron energy was leached from him by the over-hanging machinery.

The Master produced something from his pocket. A leather strap with a small black box attached to it. "I could help you to escape, and preserve a good chunk of the time-lines."

The Doctor didn't lift his head this time. "Why? Why would you help me?"

"I don't want the Daleks to win the Time War. I don't want Davros to conquer the universe and beyond. Mostly though, I don't want to go through the rest of time without you. You, Doctor make everything that much more enjoyable." The Master

was now clambering up one of the crumpled TARDIS walls. He reached the Doctor after a minute and he sat there with a smile on his face. "Just kill me now." The Doctor groaned. "I would rather be dead than have to listen to either you or Davros gloating any more."

The Master tutted and strapped the small device around the Doctor's wrist. "Vortex Manipulator, Doctor. A present from one of your companions. Of course, I had to kill them to retrieve it, but a worthwhile sacrifice."

This was the point that the Doctor would usually explode into a tirade against the Master, but the fact was he was just too tired. The Master finished attaching the Vortex Manipulator to the Doctor's wrist. "I've set it to return you back to the moment just before your regeneration. Goodbye, Doctor. It was nice to meet you."

With that The Master pressed the button on the little gadget and the Doctor blinked out of existence.

* * *

Davros was busy gloating when the regenerating Time Lord disappeared.

"Oh dear. It would appear that I've gotten the beating of you, again." The Doctor said, unable to keep the glee out of his voice. "What's happening?" Davros roared. Several Daleks began to disentangle themselves from the darkness, clunking forward, their eye stalks thrashing wildly, their guns sweeping from side to side. Flashes of bright white light danced across the basement, as the Doctor and Ace scurried for cover.

"Ah more guests to the party. Sorry, I'm all out of Screaming Eagle, but my friend here brought her own bottle. " The Doctor grinned. Ace didn't need telling twice, she produced the silver cannister from behind her back, pushing both ends together. There was an audible 'click' as the modified ignition mechanism sparked to life. The young woman lobbed the can of Nitro-nine at the advancing Daleks.

The death-dealing machines didn't flinch, continuing to push forward. One of the Daleks was hurled into the air as the Nitro-nine exploded.

Several chunks of flaming poly-carbide shell fell from the air, clattering into its brethren.

The Doctor took the fight to the survivors, jamming their communications with his sonic screwdriver. He was aware that Davros was watching the events, with an almost bored look on his face.

Ace grabbed a malfunctioning Dalek by the eyepiece and, using all the strength she could muster, she swung it into the path of another. They collided with a 'clang', ricocheting off a wall.

The Doctor advanced on Davros. "You're wasting your time, Doctor. I already know everything I require to build a race of immortal Daleks."

"Nonsense, you're a despot who won't lie down and quit."

The laugh that echoed around the room chilled the Doctor and Ace to their bones. The Dalek warriors had been dispatched, leaving the three alone in the basement.

"This little office block, not only was it your personal hell but my way of emptying all of the Time Lord knowledge from your pea-sized brain."

The Doctor thought back to sitting at his desk, piles of papers he couldn't remember writing, the 'De-cluttering process', it had all been a ruse to lure the Doctor(s) and his companions.

"You've tried all this before, Davros. What makes this time any different?" The Doctor stood with his jaw held resolute.

"Because this time I've found a way to meld Time Lord and Dalek DNA." Davros almost whispered the words. He smiled as the Doctor staggered backwards, the words having the desired effect. "Impossible."

"And yet, I have achieved it."

As if summoned by Davros' words a Dalek, much larger than any the Doctor had seen before, rolled into the basement. It stood over six feet high, its red and black casing giving it a sinister image. The machine possessed tank-like tracks to manoeuvre its large frame. The gun resembled an automatic machine gun. Ready to fire.

The Doctor stood in awe for a moment. Ace sidled up to him. "Ok, Professor. Now's the point where you say, run!"

The Doctor shook his head and looked down at his friend, "Not this time, Dorothy. It's my final curtain call."

With that the huge Dalek swivelled, aiming its gun at the Doctor. It seemed to waiver a moment, unsure of what to do next. "Exterminate him!" Davros screamed.

The Daleks turned towards Davros. "Ex-ter-minate." The machine trained its gun on the creature before it. "Still... Time Lord..."

A bright blue bolt flashed across the room, hitting Davros square in the chest. The figure slumped backwards with the force of the blast.

The Doctor felt a sudden sense of relief, as if he was glad at the turn of events, that Davros was dead.

Moments later Davros was bathed in a white light and disappeared from the room.

"Transmat." The Doctor said to Ace by way of an explanation.

The Dalek swung back towards the Doctor. "Still... Time Lord..." It repeated.

"I know." The Doctor said. He turned towards

Ace and nodded to her. "One for your talents, Dorothy."

Ace pulled out another can of Nitro-nine as she advanced on the Dalek.

"I'm ready..." it said in its mono-tone voice.

Ace activated the cannister and pushed it through one of the vents in the Dalek's hood. Ace seemed rooted to the spot unable to move. This was grotesque, she was about to kill a creature that was part Time lord, but it was also part relentless murderer.

The Doctor slipped his hand in hers, she turned to look at his face, he was grinning. "Run," the Doctor whispered and they fled the basement as it exploded around them.

* * *

As the building collapsed, Ace and the Doctor could see the glimpses of other realities behind the crumbling walls.

There were noises, like a zip being undone, as realities clashed, vying for space. In one reality the

office block was a dark artment building with shady looking inhabitants. In another, the building had never been built, a lovely field of green grass over-run with wildlife. In yet another, a large palace full of armed guards.

A crescendo of noise built all around the two adventurers. And then they found themselves standing somewhere very familiar. "Coal Hill School. It seems that my past and future are intertwined with this place as much as it is with the TARDIS, or Gallifrey."

Ace looked up at him. "Feels odd being back here."

The Doctor looked at his companion and then did something very unexpected. He put an arm around her shoulder and hugged her.

As they pulled apart, the Doctor regained his aloof demeanour.

"So, what's next for you, Dorothy?" He asked.

Ace wrinkled her nose, clearly rankled that he was continuing to call her by her birth name.

"I have a space cruiser to take back to its rightful owner, and then I hope I can dodge him for the rest

of my life." Ace replied, in that sarcastic tone of hers.

The Doctor thrust a hand into one of his pockets and he pulled out a mobile phone. Ace noticed it was the same colour blue as the Tardis.

"Ah, here's my ride." The Doctor grinned and pressed some buttons.

Within a second, Ace and the Doctor heard the 'vroop vroop' of the TARDIS, as its wheezing engines forced it through space and time.

The door wrenched open and Alison Cheney ran out, she hesitated for a moment and then thrust her arms around the Doctor's waist.

"Where the hell have you been? I was so worried."

Ace nodded to the Doctor and turned to leave.

Like so many other things she had inherited from her friend, the Doctor, she hated goodbyes.

* * *

The Master poked his head out of the Tardis doors. "Ah, decided to show your face again. Can't say we missed you."

The Doctor smiled. "Any more of that and I'll have you melted down, you old sourpuss."

"So, come on." Alison butted in, "Where have you been?"

The Doctor walked to the Tardis. "It's a long story, and I'm still a bit fuzzy on some parts..."

"I'm sure you'll feel the need to divulge it to us over the next several hours." The Master piped up.

The Doctor chuckled, and then a serious look settled on his face. "I'd like a few moments to myself." There was something about the way he said it that sounded more like an order, than a request.

The Master shrugged and disappeared back into the Police Box. Alison shuffled towards the door, throwing a concerned look back at The Doctor, before she too took refuge in the time machine.

The Doctor stood and watched as the time-lines began to settle. A climbing frame in the school yard disappeared, replaced by teacher parking spaces. The Doctor tutted.

On the other side of the road, a smartly dressed young woman was pushing a pram and talking to her infant. Within a few steps, her long dark hair

had become spiky and blue. Her clothes had changed to ripped jeans, and a t-shirt with the sleeves slashed out of it. The Doctor felt his hearts ache as the pram dissolved, becoming a large dog that didn't want to be on a lead.

Time could be cold and cruel sometimes.

The Doctor thought back to the words Davros had used. There were multiple ninth incarnations of the Doctor running amok.

Was the Doctor a pawn? Was he a puppet, who had been created from a spark of Artron energy? Was he working on behalf of the Time Lords, or The Valeyard, or Davros?

He didn't know, but he suspected that he would find out all the answers... in time.

The elephantine groaning of the TARDIS engines, as it shifted out of reality, signalled the start of a new adventure.

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